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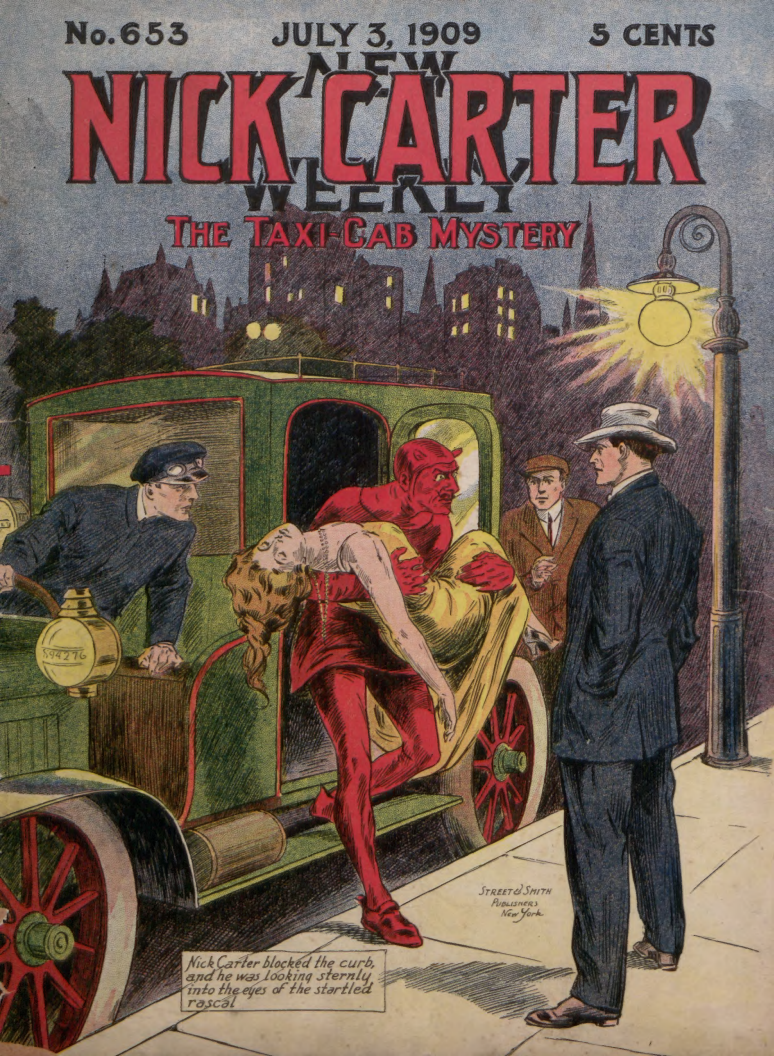
NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

THE TAXI-CAB MYSTERY



Nick Carter blocked the curb, and he was looking sternly into the eyes of the startled rascal

NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

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THE TAXICAB MYSTERY;

OR,

Nick Carter Closes a Deal.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

A MOST PECULIAR ACCIDENT.

"Look out, Danny, to your right!"

"Too late, sir."

There was a grinding, smashing, crunching sound of wood and mechanism being demolished, as two stalwart automobiles met like two giant gladiators, in the middle of a country road. The heavier of the two veered to one side after the first impact, and came to a complaining halt; the other had fared far worse; it keeled over on one side, slid to a ditch, and turned a circular aërial flop that was at once dramatic and spectacular.

The occupants of the big touring car did not escape without considerable discomfort. Three were tossed out upon the road, and, as it was approaching night, the tumble was not exactly pleasant, especially as they landed in a mud puddle.

For at least sixty seconds everything was in a chaotic condition.

It was at a fork of three roads, on the way to New York, a part of Lafayette Boulevard, for the most part surrounded by trees, and in a district not yet densely populated below Riverdale.

That big machine had whizzed, with lightning speed, past Hastings, Mount St. Vincent, and Yonkers. There was every reason why it should proceed rapidly, for it was Nick Carter's big car, and he had on board a desperate criminal. Nick, while on a vacation, taking his car along, had stopped at one of the big golf and country clubs. While there, one of its chief members, a certain Mr. Stetlow, real estate magnate and all-around good fellow, had been murdered most mysteriously. Nick had taken up the case and solved it, with the assistance of his trusty assistants, Patsy and Chickering Carter, both of whom had arrived upon the scene unexpectedly, and had helped to round up a rascally gang, opposed to Stetlow. It had been clearly shown that an old-time offender, a bald-headed reprobate whom Nick Carter had been after for some time, was at the bottom of it all, assisted by one Tom Brevert, also well known to Nick. Stetlow had been murdered by the bald-headed man, and while this party traveled under any number of odd names, not only because of his Chicago associations but a New York bond theft, Carter knew him as "Squint" and had named him that at the conclusion of the last case. The man had a round, moon face, was fairly intelligent, and had a habit of puckering up his eyes in a nervous fashion.

The detective's machine headed for New York from the clubhouse at half-past three. He could not escape from his innumerable friends there before that hour. In the car at the time were Danny, Nick's chauffeur, Nick himself, Patsy Garvan, Chickering, and the manacled Squint. They had resolved to take the murderer to New York for trial, principally because he had been mixed up in sundry other serious cases and was wanted badly.

Once placed on trial for murder, conviction was certain, and Carter knew this. He was willing to temporarily call a halt on his vacation, and go into harness again, for the sake of placing one expert rascal where he belonged.

The touring car had started away under the most

auspicious circumstances. With every club member waving a frantic and enthusiastic "bon voyage," it had shoved its nose along the open road for New York, the prisoner in the back seat, with Patsy and Chick, while Nick was riding in front with Danny.

There was only one regret annoying them on the homeward trip. A second scoundrel had been mixed up in affairs, Tom Brevert. Tom had played the high horse at the club. He had mixed in, furthermore, with the best families, being supplied with sufficient money, and he had defied the detective. The very last thing he had consummated was to write a brief note to Carter, in which he repeated his defiance, declaring that it was easy to fool the detective, and that it might be a long day before he was ever captured.

Tom, born of good parents, had proven a black sheep. He took money from his father by stealth and finally vanished. One murder, at least, was charged against him, for Nick had found that Tom had killed an old servant in the home of a Mr. Minton, of Riverside Drive, where Brevert had once been welcome. Yet this young criminal, with his shrewd tactics, had managed, so far, to elude Carter, and play at bluff with him in a very modern and approved fashion. Needless to say, Squint and Tom were working together, and had been from the very beginning. With one "under cover," however, it looked as if Tom might be picked off before many moons.

Carter was indeed on his mettle.

Now an accident had intervened. With the lights of "Little Old New York" dead ahead, a collision had taken place that seemed suggestive of new dangers and complications.

Nick Carter and Danny had managed to remain in the car, for they had been the first to see that collision could not possibly be avoided. They had gripped the car in a strong hold, and, while the big machine veered like a cannon ball, they were not unseated.

Patsy and Chick were not so fortunate.

With the first terrific impact they were hurtled from their seats headforemost into a puddle at the right of the road. The fate of the other machine has already been described.

Carter, however, had noted, in that brief interval, two very peculiar things. One was that there had been no excuse for the accident. It looked as if the second car had deliberately intended to run into them; the other, that two men had sprung from the said car before it ever reached the larger machine, and had hurried down the road, past his own auto, with heads almost covered in big automobile coats and the upper parts of their faces concealed by great green goggles.

The darkness made the accident all the more serious. Trees lined the road and threw shadows; it had been cloudy all day and evening swooped down unexpectedly.

As the auto came to a stop, Nick Carter sprang out, brushing past Danny, who seemed to feel that it had all been his personal fault.

The first essential act was to drag Patsy and Chick from the mess in which they found themselves. The mud was knee-deep, and Patsy had been stunned by his fall. Danny gave immediate assistance to Chick, while Nick pulled poor Patsy out of the muck, depositing him, in an upright position, on the side of the road.

When this had been accomplished, Nick Carter looked up to see where the other unfortunates had gone. He had heard nothing from them.

To his great surprise, the road was barren of life, save for themselves.

Across from where he stood he could see a jumbled mass that might once have been an automobile. It poked its nose into the air and was spattered over with mud.

Danny came up the slope from the ditch, panting.

"Where are they?" Nick Carter inquired incredulously.

"Scooted powerful quick, sir," was the chauffeur's wondering response.

"I should say they did, and—look here, Danny, "Shifty"—Squint—where is he? Gone! They got him!"

The detective had glanced first toward the rear seat of the touring car and then along the surrounding road; their prisoner was not to be seen; he had most mysteriously disappeared. The bushes that lined either side of the road betrayed no clue. It was simply a case of a clean-cut escape.

"Did Shifty fall out when Chick and Patsy took their tumble?" the detective inquired eagerly.

"No, sir," Danny responded. "He was in the bottom of the car. It was impossible for him to have rolled out."

"Then the occupants of that other machine, after they made their flying spring, must have lifted him out."

"They doubtless did, sir."

"We must scatter and find them."

"Yes, sir; which way?"

"In every direction."

Chick declared himself ready for anything, dripping with mud as he was, and Nick dispatched him through the woods to the right. Danny went to the left, and Patsy down the road for Garvan had recovered and was keen on the job.

The theft of their very valuable prisoner had angered all of them, for it looked as though Shifty had indeed managed to escape.

Twenty minutes afterward all returned to the road and gathered about the touring car, disconsolate and very much chagrined. Their individual trails had led to nowhere, and consequently had produced no results. The puzzling occupants of the wrecked car had not been even seen, while Shifty had vanished into thin air, handcuffs and all. It appeared to be a prearranged deal.

Carter walked across to the dismantled car in the ditch, Danny and Chick accompanying him. He looked it over very carefully, but there was nothing

that might lead to the discovery of the identity of its late occupants, save one big brown glove—a glove such as a man at the wheel might wear. It was by no means a commonplace glove, being of a peculiar shade of brown, and rimmed at the wrist end with white. Nick discovered it at the far side of the car, in the grass.

"I've seen that car before," Danny remarked suddenly.

Nick Carter was interested instantly.

"Where?" he asked.

"Up at the colony around the club we've just left."

"Who does it belong to?"

"I couldn't say that. I've simply seen it at the club, that's all. It has been in front of the second porch more than once."

"Then we have been followed, and by going around they purposely met us head on."

"It certainly looks that way," remarked Chick.

"I wonder if Tom Brevert could be a factor in the case?" mused Nick.

"I wouldn't be a bit surprised, sir. I guess he knows how to run a machine, although he once told me he didn't."

"If we had only looked them over."

"Couldn't have seen anything; they were so bundled up."

"It was very quick work on their part, wasn't it, Chick? I admire whoever is responsible for their unadulterated nerve. They jumped from the car when they planned to collide with us, and ran to the left. We jumped out on the opposite side. As yourself and Patsy took a double header, they simply helped Shifty to the ground and took to the woods. I am surprised that we did not run against them—one of us, at least."

"We were some time in getting Patsy out of the mud," Danny interpolated; "he was stuck in it, head-first, as if he had been shot out of a gun. That collision wasn't any small affair, sir. They zipped around at full speed from the crossroad and steered straight at us. Then the man at the wheel, he left things and jumped, with the other fellow following. I'm dead sure they did it on purpose."

"But you couldn't recognize them?"

"No, sir; not with those coats and goggles on."

As darkness was steadily settling, no time was to be lost in further discussion. After a brief examination of the car, and a few minor mechanical repairs, they were able to proceed to New York; but the zest of the ride had disappeared, and Nick Carter, at least, was more unhappy and disgruntled than he had been in a very long while.

CHAPTER II.

BREVERT'S ASTONISHING STATEMENT.

When the city was reached, Patsy and Chick dropped off at the Murray Hall baths for a scrub up and a thorough cleansing. Mud covered them from head to foot, and they did not intend to return to the house in that condition. As for Nick Carter, he was more than willing to spend the remainder of the trip alone. Danny was not in a talkative mood, and he was left in silent contemplation of these recent happenings, which brought him intense satisfaction.

Squint, alias "Shifty Mike," could not be without friends; friends that were stanch and true. The detective doubted that the foreigners who made up the population of Beula, a village back from the clubhouse in the woods, had anything to do with the clever delivery. More than likely, Tom Brevert and some daring companion were responsible for the theft of the auto and the deliberate collision upon Lafayette Boulevard.

The memory of that frantic search through the woods to the right and left of the road, with its unsatisfactory conclusion, did not tend to increase Nick Carter's peace of mind. It was seldom that a rogue of Shifty's class managed to get the best of him, and he did not relish it. For a week now a series of disagreeable and tantalizing setbacks had been experienced. It had to stop. Here was a deal that needed closing; and Nick Carter's strong jaws snapped together with a new determination.

They reached the Madison Avenue house, and Carter discovered that a cab was drawn up in front, as if it had been waiting for some time. The side lights gleamed dimly and the driver was asleep on the box.

"Must be some one to see me, Danny," the detective commented, rousing himself from his lethargy. "I can't imagine who it is, either."

Joseph met Nick in the vestibule.

Now Joseph was the most phlegmatic individual alive. He said little, even under pressure, always kept himself well under control, and was as impassive as a redskin.

For once Joseph was apparently excited. It didn't take the form of hysteria or bubbling chatter, but his eyes glared and his hands trembled as he stood leaning up against the stair post.

Nick looked at him in perfect astonishment for some seconds before venturing even so much as a word.

"What ails you, Joseph?" he finally demanded.

"The man—your caller, sir," Joseph managed to murmur, looking over his shoulder in the direction of the sitting room, now dark and in shadow.

"I have a caller, then?"

"Yes, yes, sir."

"Something unusual about him?"

"Oh, sir, it is piteous; it is terrible."

Joseph looked as if he might have seen a ghost.

"Come, come," the detective exclaimed, a trifle impatiently, "give me his card."

Joseph shook his head.

"He gave me none, sir."

"But he must have given you his name."

"Yes, sir; Mr. Brevert!"

"What! Brevert!"

"Exactly, sir."

"A young man, Joseph?"

The perturbed assistant seemed puzzled, winked and blinked and scratched his head doubtfully.

"There's no good way of telling, Mr. Carter!"

"Are you crazy?" Nick demanded.

"I don't think so, sir."

"Well, why can't you answer my question, then?"

"You had best see for yourself, sir," Joseph answered weakly, designating the open door of the gloomy parlor.

"Is he in there?"

"He is, sir."

"Then why didn't you turn on the lights?"

"He—he asked that I would not, sir. He preferred the dark, and I can't say that I blame him, sir."

Carter reached for the hall switch, pressing a button. Immediately the sitting room was brilliantly illuminated, a dozen or more half-hidden electric balls springing into view.

At the same moment a low, broken cry came from the room, and Nick Carter hastened to enter.

He echoed the first cry, starting back in bewildered astonishment at what he saw. It was ludicrous, yet painfully realistic.

A stout, portly gentleman was walking up and down the floor, his hands behind his back, groaning and swearing by turns. But he was in no wise in a normal condition, for he looked like a gigantic bird, his body being covered with what were unquestionably fine feathers.

His outer clothing had been removed, and he was completely coated over by this fluttering, flimsy white and gray shroud, that appeared all the more grotesque in the brilliant light from the great chandelier.

"Tar and feathers!" Nick Carter cried explosively.

"Yes, yes, yes," barked an angry voice, "tar and feathers, sir. It's funny, isn't it?"

"Far from it," Nick replied sincerely, yet not quite recovered from his sudden amazement; "what can I do for you?"

The feathered figure looked around hopelessly at the leather chairs and sighed, realizing that it might not be best for him to sit down under the circumstances.

"Don't you remember me? My name is Brevert; I am a banker. Mr. Minton, one of your late clients, told me of the Nick Carter of fame—I'm here—I'm here."

Still Carter wondered what it all meant, and mentally excused Joseph's upset state.

"Yes, Mr. Brevert," the detective returned, partially recovering from the initial shock of that most peculiar meeting. "You will remember that I called at your place of business downtown not so long since; I looked over your typewriters and made certain facts known to you. In the name of Heaven, what has happened to you?"

The sturdy old banker felt the indignity of the condition in which he found himself, but he was so angry that he could hardly contain himself.

Up and down the room he paced.

"I have waited for you quite some time," he wailed; "imagine my misery, my suffering, my complete humiliation, Mr. Carter."

"You should have attention, Mr. Brevert," Nick advised, "and have this horrible covering removed at once."

The banker interrupted.

"Just so; tell your man to send for some one, a doctor—somebody, I don't know—you don't know—some man who for a consideration can keep his mouth shut; in the meanwhile, I want to tell you of this atrocious and undeserved insult."

Of course Nick Carter was just as eager to hear that story as his feathered client was to tell it; so Joseph was given immediate instructions to summon a physician whom the sleuth knew personally.

He compelled Brevert, in spite of his protestations, to take one of the leather chairs.

"Now, sir," he resumed, "tell me the facts of this most perplexing state of affairs."

"You know my business, Mr. Carter; I am a small banker in the lower part of town, on the West Side. I am in a vicinity where there are many wholesale produce houses—fruit, vegetables, staple goods, etc. I have prospered, I think, and prided myself for years that I had no enemies, because I made none."

"I am conversant with all you state, Mr. Brevert."

"We shall not rehearse the late unpleasant facts regarding my son Tom; you know those details. It has been a very heavy cross for me to bear, for I loved the boy, and have missed him as only a true and long-suffering father can. After Tom deliberately robbed the office safe he skipped, and I did not hear from him for a long while, until, in fact, last Wednesday. He then wrote me a brief note, in which he stated that he was completely out of funds and that I *must* help him."

"From where was this letter posted?"

"I did not notice that."

"Have you the letter?"

"I tore it up and threw it away."

"But you must have kept some record as to where to send the money?"

"No, not a bit of it. I did not intend to further feed his rowdy and dissolute appetite. I have done with him—I will have no more of him."

"But what has this to do with your present condition, Mr. Brevert?"

"I am coming to that."

"Just a moment. Do you recall where your son asked his answer to be addressed?"

"I did not read that far."

"Then you did not peruse the entire letter?"

"I did not; it was in bits after the first three lines."

"You couldn't even find the bits of that letter?"

"I could not."

"Well, proceed, sir."

"Yesterday, just as we were closing, I was visited by a committee of men. They were of the under-

crust and plainly men engaged in the push-cart business, although I knew none of them."

"Were they Italians?"

"Yes."

"But you did not know them—not even one member of the committee?"

"No, Mr. Carter. I have only had relations with the fruit salesmen of the wholesale houses."

"What did these men want?"

"A certain sum of money."

"A large sum?"

"Yes, ten thousand dollars."

"Was it in the shape of a blunt demand, or a little 'private donation' under penalty?"

"They simply wanted a loan, they said."

"You refused, of course?"

"Certainly I did. They had no security. They simply wanted a loan, as if money could be handed out in that fashion."

"Did they state to what purpose this money was to be put?"

"Yes; it was to form an opposing fruit industry in their section—it was to protect them against what they deemed a 'trust.'"

"No securities were suggested?"

"None."

"What was your answer?"

"I turned the matter down flat. It ended by my kicking the leader out of the place—I believe he introduced himself as Agritti."

"That was a mistake, Mr. Brevert," Nick Carter observed, "a very grave error."

"They were very objectionable."

"But to proceed," the detective continued, "when did *this* happen?" and he pointed to the array of grotesque feathers.

CHAPTER III.

A STRANGE DEATH THREAT.

Old Mr. Brevert, who in his natural state was a very austere and dignified individual, had trouble in expressing himself coherently, his indignation was so great; and, in addition to this, he had a lingering suspicion that Nick Carter was laughing covertly at his comical appearance, for comical he was, no matter how it was taken.

"Confound it, sir," he cried, "I'm trying to tell you. Let me have my own time; if I've waited so long for you, sir, can't you give me ten minutes to explain?"

"I beg your pardon," Nick answered quietly; "please proceed. I shall not press you again, Mr. Brevert."

"As I was about to say," the banker continued, "I kicked that fellow out, whether it was politic or not. Then I thought no more of the matter. At present, I am alone in my home; the others have gone down to Asbury to visit friends. At six o'clock this evening I left the bank and went to the house, taking certain papers with me that I intended to work over. I'm not one of those 'clubby' kind, and my age and success doesn't prevent me from working every night except Sunday until one or two o'clock."

"That, sir, is commendable industry," Nick observed.

"I went, not to my upstairs office, as is customary with me, but to the library, the second room from the front parlor on the first floor. Things were convenient there, and I decided to sit right down and attend to my business affairs without unlocking above. It was somewhere around seven or half past when the doorbell jangled. I answered it."

Here Brevert hesitated, with every indication of continued anger and embarrassment.

"I had no sooner opened the door when two men seized me, leaping into the vestibule, which was dark; I could see other dim forms beyond, but they all wore masks."

"Is the street at this time and place deserted to the extent where such bold proceedings are possible?" the detective inquired.

"Yes, Mr. Carter, few persons are around; I don't believe you could find a policeman in three blocks if a murder was going on; I certainly intend to enter a complaint."

"Still, you knew the intruders; they were doubtless the same men who had previously visited you."

"Beyond the question of a doubt. What followed was hideous, sir, perfectly hideous. I remember it indistinctly, for they maltreated me, knocked me this way and that; my outer clothing was stripped from my body and a thin coat of tar administered; over this the feathers, as you see, were smeared. My protestations were of no avail. It was accomplished quickly and with dispatch. I recognized no single man and heard no single voice; it was a silent expedition from first to last."

"No robbery was committed?"

"None whatever."

"Nothing touched about the house in the way of valuables?"

"Nothing."

"Was the subject of that 'loan' brought up at all?"

"Not one single word was said during the whole affair."

"How do you account for the shameful attack? It does not smack of Italian revenge; it is a Wild West or South Georgia episode. I never knew of such a thing in New York. It is absolutely incomprehensible, sir, absolutely!"

"I can't account for it at all, Mr. Carter; there is where the mystery comes in. Yet there is more to tell!"

"More?"

"Yes; a life has been threatened."

"Your own?"

"No; read this."

The banker thrust a small crumpled piece of yellow paper into the hands of the detective; Carter reached for it eagerly, and read its contents.

The scribbled words were written on the long fold from an ordinary shoe box; the scent of leather being strongly suggested. It was one of the inner side flaps that are used to cover the shoes.

The words, obviously written in a disguised hand, were:

"You are hereby warned that unless you concede to our wishes you will suffer still more at our hands; you understand why; we know about your son, and he is branded for death. We will kill him in a fortnight should you longer stand out against us. The amount has been raised to $50,000. A messenger will communicate with you to-morrow."

This startling and illiterate piece of rubbish was signed, not in letters, but simply with a pin thrust through the lower right-hand corner of the paper.

With a scrutinizing glance Carter removed that pin from its lodging place, examined it under every possible light and angle, and finally thrust it into a corner of his coat lapel. His suspicions were aroused, and he could not possibly account for the dark stain around the point of the little pin.

From a very ordinary case of criminal escape, adventure, and small tribulations, the affair was broadening out, until its proportions were indeed becoming impressive.

Brevert had exhausted himself with his story, so far, and panted from his extra exertions. He was not accustomed to excitement, and met it in a rather feeble way.

When Carter believed he had heard the entire story, he settled back in his own chair, groping in the midst of many possible questions for one ray of light that might extricate him from his own perplexities. He no longer gazed upon the banker with a covert smile. He had even ceased to look back upon those old associations that had existed. Those were the days when Tom Brevert went mad over his love for the millionaire Minton's daughter, only to be asked to stop his attentions. At that period Minton and the banker had been sincere, solid friends. Minton had carried on his business with Brevert. They became estranged, and the rich man's money was withdrawn from the bank. This was followed by Tom murdering one of the Minton servants, who would not consent to aid in a plot against the young woman's affianced. How well, too, did Nick Carter recall the day he discovered a papier-maché safe in Brevert's office, Tom having stolen the other one and rifled its contents. Brevert, Sr., was as fine an old man as ever drew breath, lenient to his own blood, but stern and strict with all others. Business was his watchword, and now he found himself surrounded by most mysterious conditions.

"Did these fellows know your son?" the detective asked.

"Even I did not—do not know them, Mr. Carter."

"Why should they seek to murder Tom?"

"I suppose it is a threat to make me hand over the money."

"But Tom is not in New York, is he? You have not heard from him?"

"Not since the note I referred to."

Carter, from the date it was received, knew that Tom, at that time, must have doubtless been at the club colony, where it was known his finances were running low.

"What do you intend to do in the matter, sir?"

"I am here to have that very advice given me."

"Do you mean to say that you place the case in my hands?"

"Yes, Mr. Carter."

"But why did you come to me? We were not very good friends the last time we met. You almost ordered me out of your office because I intimated that your son was treating you shamefully."

"I do not want to have this matter aired. If I went to the police, every morning newspaper would be smearing it through their columns."

"But Minton—Minton did not tell you to come to me, did he? I thought you no longer corresponded, or even spoke."

"I heard of you, through Minton, before our misunderstanding. Then again it reached my ears how you had managed the affair of the missing bonds. You are supposed to be a master of your craft."

"You do me great honor, Mr. Brevert."

"Ah, my motives and my words are inspired by one thing alone. I want assistance. I need it very badly. I am selfish. You must see me through this."

"It is a wonder to me that you came to my place in this condition. How did you manage it?"

"They left after their villainous work. I found myself in this deplorable state. I thought you would be at your office. I did not stop to telephone, but, slipping on a pair of low shoes and a loose overcoat, called for a cab. I suppose it is waiting for me outside yet. The darkness shielded me. I do not think that my terrible costume, if you might term it that, was noticed, for I moved quickly. I would not—simply would not summon the police or my private physician. I resolved to come directly here. If you had been here when I arrived you might have hurried back and attempted to track the rascals."

"Joseph said you would not go upstairs; that you would not permit the lights to be turned on? Why was that?"

"I did not care to soil your office, Carter; let me put it that way. They have made a monkey of me. I was content to walk up and down here in the dark, because there were mirrors, and I was hardly an agreeable sight, even to myself."

Carter was almost ready to smile. He began now again to see how extremely ridiculous the banker actually did appear.

"I am afraid, Mr. Brevert, to be perfectly candid," the sleuth resumed, "that your asking me to take up the case presents some embarrassing obstacles, and I

hesitate to even discuss them with you. You have come to me, the parent, the father. You wish me to prevent any disaster that may come to your boy, and yet—even now I am trying to locate him. I am trying to put him behind the bars for several very degenerate acts. He has killed his man and he was concerned in an abduction case up the country. We work at cross-purposes, you see. Tell me candidly how we may overcome this tangle, this very uncomfortable snarl."

Brevert, Sr., was equally outspoken.

"We shall not rehearse, Mr. Carter, the faults of Tom; we shall not discuss his merits nor his demerits. When such a time arrives as he may be brought face to face with the law I will be there. I will supply the best counsel that money can buy. I will see him through, no matter what he has done. That is the way I work. But now that death threatens him from another and a cowardly source, I am just as willing to protect him."

"You were ever a good father, Mr. Brevert; I admire you for it, sir."

This was said with considerable warmth.

The banker appeared to like the compliment.

"My own father was different, Mr. Carter," he said retrospectively. "There were three sons of us: Ben and Jim and I. I was the wild boy. I was the one to continually get in trouble; the others always did the right thing at the right time. They were sons to be proud of. I tell you this bit of personal history that you may understand me the better, and sympathize with me, perhaps. I ran away and went out West. I think I was bad every minute of the time. I married wrong and I lived wrong, yet never once did my own father help me, try to make me better, or give me an upward lift. If I asked him for a dollar I received a reprimand; if I asked him for a kindly word it was the same thing, or silence, which was worse. He saw in me only that which was bad, and took the stand that 'I was no son of his.' The consequence was that as I grew, braced up, made my own way in the world, and had children of my own, I resolved to be the opposite of that father. I said that if I ever had a son, no matter what he did, I should still feel the parent love, and I should continue to realize that my blood ran in his veins. If the Father of all fathers could forgive, then I reasoned that I could. And so it went with Tom. I have lectured him, but I am still his father; I have felt keenly disappointed, but I am still his father; I have suffered because of his ingratitude, but I am still his father."

"It is sound philosophy of life, Mr. Brevert. Please permit me to express my appreciation of every single word."

"You may very naturally wonder why I tore up that letter from Tom. I will tell you. I wanted him to come back home, sir. He could have the money, but he must come home; and Tom would do it, after he had used up all his ready cash, I felt sure. As for the demands of that gang of cutthroats, the amount is exorbitant. I am well off, but I could spare no such sum. I want to see them brought to the bar of justice, Mr. Carter, right up to it, fairly and squarely."

Nick was looking down at the carpet at his feet. He had never been placed in a like position before. When he glanced up it was with a harrowed series of wrinkles upon his brow.

"Are you sure that you understood my remarks, Mr. Brevert?" he asked seriously.

"Concerning Tom?"

"Yes."

"That you were after him? That you wanted to arrest him? That he was accused of murder—and other things?"

"Yes, sir."

"I understood you, yes, Mr. Carter."

"But, sir, I—I——"

"You must not hesitate. Let Tom be brought to his fate. If he has killed a man he must stand trial for it. As I said before, I have money to defend him with. I will stick to the boy until every dollar is gone; but when a gang of despicable rascals set a plot on foot to kill him, that must be looked into. I want to engage your expert services in the matter. Will you undertake the commission?"

Nick Carter did not hesitate longer.

"Yes, Mr. Brevert, I will," was his answer.

And the detective was more interested than he had been in any case of past years.

The physician arrived at this juncture, and Nick retired while the luckless Brevert was being renovated. It was a tedious job, but finally the banker was restored to something approaching his normal condition. Danny had been dispatched to the Brevert house with a nightkey, and returned with a new suit of clothes. The hours had swung along and Nick was not surprised when Patsy and Chick interrupted a conversation that was going on in the detective's upper office.

Chick was the first to intrude.

"Pardon me," he declared, "but there is a green taxicab waiting outside. We didn't notice it at first, but the chauffeur asked us, as soon as he saw us entering, if he was to wait any longer for Mr. Brevert."

The banker looked around in great surprise.

"I have no taxicab waiting," was his ejaculation; "I came up in an ordinary cab—a horse vehicle, understand. There must be some mistake."

"He asked for you," Chick retorted, with much confidence; "he even mentioned your name."

CHAPTER IV.

THE TAXICAB MYSTERY.

"Why, Chick, I saw that cab myself as I came in, some time ago." Nick Carter put in. "Do you mean to say that it is not there?"

"There is no ordinary cab, with a horse, in front of the house, Nick."

"But there is a green taxicab?"

"There certainly is."

"And the chauffeur asked for Mr. Brevert?"

"Yes. He seemed in doubt as to whether to wait longer."

"How long had he been waiting?"

"I did not ask that. Both Patsy and myself supposed that it had all been arranged."

"This is certainly peculiar," the detective declared. He turned to the rehabilitated Brevert. "You know nothing of a taxicab, do you?"

"I do not. I did not order one. The other cab, however, I did ask to wait for me, even if it happened to be midnight."

"He was sleeping on the box as I entered the house early in the evening," Nick Carter admitted.

"Well, he isn't there now," Chick said with emphasis.

All of which necessitated an immediate investigation, especially as Mr. Brevert was worn out and the physician had advised him to go home without delay.

Nick Carter had previously given the banker some good solid advice. He was not to stir from his home any more than was necessary, and was to await the arrival of that "message" with almost religious care. The sleuth had promised to send one of his assistants around, in a secret capacity, to stand constantly on guard.

Now a new source of annoyance had arisen, and most unexpectedly, too. What was the meaning of it?

It was not deemed best to have Mr. Brevert risk himself out in the cool night air nor to engage in any argument that might possibly arise. He sat in the hallway, while Chick, Patsy, and the detective descended the steps to the curb.

One of the average types of taxicabs, such as are constantly to be seen on the streets of New York, stood directly in front of the Carter residence. The chauffeur, a short, stout fellow, smooth shaven, was nodding in his seat.

Chick touched him on the shoulder.

"Wake up, there," he exclaimed.

"Yes, sir, yes, sir; what is it?"

Now Nick Carter took the initiative with a special reason.

"How long have you been waiting here?" he inquired.

"For about an hour."

"Where did you come from?"

"From a bank downtown, sir."

"What bank?"

"I don't know the name of it, but I guess it was the bank of the gentleman that hired me for this trip. His name was something like Brevet or Brevert, as far as I could hear."

"Then Mr. Brevert engaged you?"

"Oh, yes, sir."

"From where?"

"The call was telephoned in to the office from the bank, and I came down?"

"At what time was the call received?"

"I don't know exactly, sir. Why, what is the matter?"

"Nothing; I simply want to know. Answer me, at about what time did you leave your stand?"

"It may have been eleven or thereabouts."

"What did the call say?"

"I was simply told that I was to go down to a certain number and wait, that's all, and that the gentlemen would be out in a minute or so."

"There were two, then?"

"Yes, sir."

"They came out of the bank building together?"

"Yes, sir."

"One, you say, was Mr. Brevert?"

"So I took it, sir, from the conversation."

"Could you repeat that conversation, such of it as you heard?"

"No; I wasn't paying much attention."

"What happened on the trip up here?"

"Nothing, sir. I was given this number, Madison Avenue, and I drove here. The house looked sort of dark, except for lights on the lower floor. One of the gentlemen got out, walked toward the steps, and I rolled up in my rug. He said to wait."

"Did you see him enter the house?"

"No, I didn't."

"Then he could have turned aside in the darkness?"

"I don't know anything about that, sir."

"Where did the other gentleman go?"

"I think he's inside yet, as far as I know."

This was indeed springing a surprise. The detective turned at once to the door of the green taxicab and swung it quickly open. The light from a far street lamp glimmered in, and at the same moment Nick Carter gave vent to a quick cry of horror.

"Look here, Chick," he exclaimed.

On the far side of the seat, partially concealed by the shadows, was the form of a small, slim man. He wore a short spring coat, and one of his hands had curled up the green cushions in a death struggle. He had been stabbed through the heart.

Patsy and Chick half lifted the man from the cab, that it might be more convenient to learn just what had taken place.

He was cold and rigid in death.

The thing had transpired with such unexpected suddenness that all hands were shocked by it. The slow conversation of the sleepy chauffeur had led up to a tragedy, remarkable for its subtle mystery.

The victim, as Nick Carter saw him, appeared to be a man past forty. Gray sprinkled his temples and he had a thin, drawn face. He was dressed none too well, and in one pocket they found a pair of paper cuffs, such as are commonly worn by clerks or bookkeepers.

The knife wound was one calculated to cause instant death, and death had come to him in a most remarkable and terrible manner.

While Patsy and Chick were engaged with the body, Nick further questioned the now frightened

chauffeur. His amazement was not assumed. He was more alarmed than the others, and trembled after his first view of the corpse.

"Can't you describe the two men who entered your cab?" Nick asked.

"The light out in front, sir, was awfully poor," the man returned. "I didn't notice them especially."

"Was the bank fully illuminated?"

"No, there was just one gas jet, somewhere in a front office."

"You are sure that you could not describe the men?"

"I never saw them plainly."

"But the man who alighted, the one you supposed to be Mr. Brevert, how did he look as he started for the steps up there? You saw him leave the cab?"

"He didn't have any top coat and was just a commonplace-looking person, sir."

"Young or old?"

"I tell you I didn't notice."

"Have you ever seen either of the two before?"

"No."

"What made you speak to the gentlemen entering? Mr. Chickering said you called to him."

"I had been sleeping. I looked at my watch and couldn't believe it was so late. When I knew they were going up into the same house I asked him to speak to the gentleman who had gone in."

"Tell me, when you ran up here, at first, did you see any other vehicle?"

"Another machine was leaving by that side entrance."

"That was my own. Danny was going down to Mr. Brevert's house. There was no cab—no ordinary night-hawk cab?"

"No, sir."

"On the way up, did you hear any conversation in the cab?"

"I did not."

"Did you hear any cries or groans, any altercation?"

"Not a sound."

"For what company do you work?"

The man gave the desired information, even reading off his number, license tag, and the number of the machine.

The identification of the murdered man by Mr. Brevert, shortly afterward, was of still more vital import. Expressing great concern, the banker said that he knew the dead man. His name was Egbert Tomilson, and he was the cashier at the bank. One glance, as he was helped down the front steps to the open door of the green taxicab, sufficed. He fell back in [illegible] horror.

"It is Tomilson!" was his first wild cry.

The [illegible] trouble in quieting him.

[illegible] discretion and care, Nick Carter [illegible] the [illegible]. While moaning and suffering from a bad case of "nerves," Brevert answered rationally.

"How long has Tomilson been in your employ, Mr. Brevert?"

"About ten years."

"How old a man is he?"

"Going on forty."

"You have always trusted him?"

"Implicitly, Mr. Carter."

"You had no engagement with him?"

"None."

"Why should he have been at the bank to-night?"

"I can explain that easily. 'Tom,' as we all call him, is an incessant worker. He is a man with a family, and has absorbed some of my enthusiasm. His duties at the bank keep him very busy. He works nights at frequent intervals on his books. He has his own key and can get in whenever he wants to."

"Had he any enemies?"

"None that I am aware of."

"You did not mention the Italian loan affair to him?"

"I have mentioned it to no one, sir."

"You can't imagine who might have committed this crime?"

"No, a thousand times no. It would seem as if I had fallen beneath a shadow, Mr. Carter."

"Did your son know the man?"

"Oh, yes, well."

"They were friends?"

"I think they were; 'Tom' could get along with anybody. In fact, I think 'Tom' has befriended my boy more than once, in a money way—let him have small amounts."

"You made those amounts good, of course?"

"Always; Tomilson told me and made some kind of an excuse for the boy."

"Have you ever engaged this taxicab or one belonging to this company?"

"I have never even taken a short trip in a taxicab. I have always stuck to the old horse affairs. I thought them far safer."

At the expiration of the interview and following his systematic investigation of the body and the taxicab, Nick Carter was more in the dark than ever. The night had weighed heavily upon him, and it had brought down upon his shoulders a burden of puzzling mystery, the like of which was not soon to be equaled. Chick and Patsy were equally agreed on the subject, and the latter expressed it:

"We're up against the real thing now."

Which was a truth in a nutshell.

CHAPTER V.

A GATHERING OF THE CLANS.

Gray dawn crept into Madison Square when Nick Carter and [illegible] had finally reached a state of calm equivalent to a frank and earnest discussion of the complicated case in hand. Old Mr. Brevert had been sent home in Nick's car, with his physician as a guard over him and Patsy as an extra precaution, the latter [illegible]

ing instructions to remain in the Brevert home until further notice.

Carter had telephoned to police headquarters, and the body of the dead cashier had been attended to.

The chauffeur of the green taxicab was also placed under surveillance, and his record became a matter for future consideration. So far, his story was without a flaw, and it did not appear at all likely that he had had anything to do with the midnight mystery.

It was a real relief to Carter to finally be closed in a single room with that most earnest and clever of assistants, Chickering. Chick knew the theories of a case; had absolute and well-founded ideas of his own, and was valuable on any and all occasions.

Somewhat exhausted, after a long night of anxious speculation and exertion, and not very much refreshed by his early morning cold bath, the detective lolled in his most comfortable chair, while the willing and eager Chick faced him.

"Well," Chick observed, with just the suspicion of a smile.

"Well," Nick Carter answered, a bit wearily.

"What do you think of it?" Chick continued.

"I am almost at my wits' ends."

"Funny that old Brevert should wander back into the fold."

"Minton suggested it, doubtless. My mission, however, Chick, is a most amazing one. On one hand, I am only too willing to capture Tom Brevert, the son of the banker, for deeds that we already know of, while, on the other hand, I am asked, by a certain client, to save Tom from secret enemies. Did you ever hear of such complications? To make matters still worse, we find a dead man in a green taxicab outside our own door, and it is Brevert's cashier. The banker can understand no reason for the murder. I can't, I am sure, and, all the while, the one man we wanted to land has escaped from us, Shifty Mike. It would seem to me that we have about all we can attend to."

"And you're a vacation, too," Chick suggested.

"I am not worrying so much about that. I had hoped, however, a long time ago, this deal. It would seem that its finale is growing farther and farther away from us as we progress. Is it barely possible that we have underestimated the set of brains pitted against us, and that we do not give full credit to the mentality of Tom and Shifty? It begins to look that way."

"I do not think Squint is overburdened with gray matter."

"That was it my impression."

"As to the other, Tom Brevert must be a shrewd fellow. He inherits brains from his father."

"Granted, granted!"

"What is on for this morning?"

"I was just thinking of that. Perry will stop at the Brevert house and I will go to get around there myself some time during the day. In the meanwhile, certain factors of the case should be carefully considered. I want you, Chick, to hunt up that taxicab concern, the green car firm. Learn all you can about our little friend who drove the cab. Follow him step by step to the bank. Report at frequent intervals to Joseph, and, if I am not here, I can communicate with him. I have asked Brevert where he ordered his own rig that brought him down here, and he said that he simply hailed a passing cab from his own front doorstep. I want to have a chat with that particular night-hawk."

"Then we can turn in now?"

"I would, most assuredly. You must remember that we've been going it for about forty-eight hours on a stretch. I do not believe in that sort of thing. Even we need rest. It is inconsistent not to expect it, Chick."

Later in the morning, after spending some time, Nick Carter eliminated one phase of the case. He communicated with a certain night-hawk driver of long acquaintance, and together they managed to run across the very driver who had been brought into play when old Brevert summoned the cab from his front stoop, and was driven to Madison Avenue. Perry, as he was called, circulated in that district. He had simply been drifting past, under no commission, when the banker hailed him. He knew that a very excitable man had asked to be driven to the home of the famous detective. He had not been paid, but he knew Brevert and appreciated the fact that he would have no trouble in securing his fare. After waiting patiently in front of the house for hours, he decided to drive away, and had done so calmly enough.

He had left of his own free will and accord; no one had asked him to do so, and he had not seen any green taxicab. He intended to call at the Brevert house and secure his fare when he got good and ready, and he guessed he knew who would pay and who wouldn't.

He was clearly out of the case, much to the disappointment of the detective.

Working on still another line of thought, and armed with the torn strip of paper from the shoe box, the detective visited, in his automobile, accompanied by Danny, at least twenty-five different shoe stores. He was failing in all but the last. No one seemed to recognize the strip of paper, despite its strange color, for white was the tendency. The last shop, a small one on Third Avenue, suggested that Carter go to a jobbing house on Broadway, well downtown. Here Nick hurried, and had a confidential chat with the head of the firm, stating the object of his mission.

"Mr. Carter," the merchant declared, "I handled that line myself at one time. It is a very cheap [illegible] shoes that sell for two and two and a half dollars a pair. They are of heavy skin and intended for persons who deal in dirt, to put it mildly. When we [illegible] the "Yellow Tigers," for that was the name we [illegible], we sold them exclusively to the lower West Side trade. Indians purchased the shoes, and [illegible] there are not many shoe stores down in that section.

they do a big business. I cut out the line for purely business reasons. The sample you show me is the 'Yellow Tiger,' and every box is lined with two folds of that yellow paper."

The statement fitted in with everything that the detective had previously surmised. He obtained a list of West Side shoe merchants, and had Danny drive to a number of them, making inquiries.

On Vesey Street, after many trips that brought no results, Nick Carter came upon a loose-tongued clerk and any number of "Yellow Tiger" brand shoes. This shop made a specialty of the shoes and pushed them because there was profit in the deal. They were a cheap shoe and were sold, for the most part, to a cheap trade.

"I suppose you sell a great many pairs every day?" Nick asked.

"More than two dozen," was the response.

"Do you keep track of these sales?"

"Only when we deliver them, and that is seldom."

The detective pulled out the strip of yellow paper, upon which the note had been written to Brevert.

"Could you tell from which particular style of shoe this paper was torn—the box, I mean?"

The clerk examined the paper carefully, although not permitted to see the scribbled side. He appeared puzzled for a while, but finally looked up, as if much interested.

"That came from a box we sold here," he commented.

"How can you tell?"

"Here is a mark—you may not have seen it, for it is in very light pencil. It is a price mark, and we invariably put it on the under side of this flap in the right-hand corner. We do it lightly and in hard pencil."

Upon examination, Nick Carter found this to be true.

"You have no way of telling how long ago you sold those shoes?"

"No, sir, not that I can think of; but it was a large size, number nine. The price of the shoe was two-fifty, the highest price shoe in the brand."

"You have a heavy Italian trade in this district?"

"Yes, we do, especially in that line of goods."

"This shoe is not a brogan?"

"No; it makes a good appearance."

"Would a push-cart peddler wear it?"

"I should say not."

"Yet it would not be worn by your best trade?"

"I might say that it is an intermediate grade."

"Show me a pair of shoes that you believe might correspond with the pair from which this sheet was torn, in boxed form."

Nick Carter examined the shoes with unusual interest, turning them over and over. They were rather clumsy looking, heavy, walking shoes, with extraordinarily heavy soles.

"During the past five days, how have your sales been going in that line? Italian?"

"I have had some calls, yes, from that source; as I say, my trade is principally among the Italians. We have the push-cart men around here. They have plenty of money and they buy good shoes, as a rule."

Nick Carter never expected the improbable, but he was impressed by what transpired a few moments later, and attributed it to sheer luck, nothing else. A woman came into the store. She was bronzed and dark-eyed and rather pretty—a young woman, say of twenty-two. She carried a parcel, wrapped in rough paper, under her arm.

"You'll have to excuse me a minute," the clerk said; "the boss is out, and I've got to attend to this customer. I'll be back in a minute." He went to the front of the store, and the detective plainly overheard the conversation.

"What is it you wish?" the clerk asked affably.

"Desa shoe," said the woman, seating herself on the bench.

"What about them?" the clerk retorted casually.

Methodically the young woman unrolled the paper from her bundle and brought into view a shoe box, slightly soiled. She removed the lid, and Nick was the first to see, peering over the bench, that one of the flaps had been torn from the box.

"My man, he tella me these shoe, they pincha him."

"Whereabouts?"

"On the topa part."

The clerk seized one of the shoes and examined it carefully, evidently not much pleased.

"We can't change these. They've been worn. Look here, rough parts on the tops. Your man should have spoken sooner. I can stretch them for you, but I can't give you a new pair. Let him come in himself, or I'll stretch them now. That's the best I can do."

But Nick Carter was exceedingly awake.

Chance had thrown in his way a possible solution of one fraction of an intricate case, and he could not afford to ignore it. He was intent, of course, upon discovering just what tribe of New York "Indians" had resolved to do Brevert an evil turn. They were responsible for threatening letters, and he must know the secret agencies in operation. Fate had played well into his hands. Because a certain pair of shoes "pinched," and because a certain woman brought them in a certain store at a certain time, he was about to get on the right track. Still, he did not interrupt that conversation. The clerk put the shoes, both of them, on a stretcher, and placed them back in the box. He was not observant enough to take any special note of the missing strip nor of the coincidence of the affair.

When the Italian woman left the store, however, Nick Carter followed. He thanked the clerk, and gave a few hurried instructions to Danny, in the machine. Danny could go home, that was the sum and substance of it.

Carter kept the woman in sight until she reached a narrow, dingy street, three blocks up. It was more an alley than a street, and even at this hour was gloomy enough for all purposes. He noted one im-

portant factor, however; at least two dozen push carts, of the average New York type, forget-me-not, bedecked with nicely polished goods, and Italians were in command.

The alley was one of those blind affairs, with a dead wall at its far extremity, yet at least three blind streets or makeshifts opened from it, to right and left. The Italian woman, with her precious bundle under her arm, entered one of these openings and headed for an open court, surrounded on all sides by the cheapest of tenement environments.

Just behind, the detective lingered, intent on following that one clue to its fountain head. He dodged in between the two stone walls of an extremely narrow passage, and saw beyond the woman, jabbering excitedly to some one on a fire escape, ten feet from him. He had entered by way of a passage that was just broad enough to admit one person; such are the approaches to this locality.

Marking well the stoop at which the woman halted, Nick waited in the shadows. He had supposed that the walls were solid on either side, but they proved to be otherwise. A door opened suddenly at his right, the wood hitting him smartly on the elbow. He turned, with the same precaution that had always stood him in such good stead, but not in time to avoid a blow, though he did have a fleeting opportunity to see the face of his assailant.

Shifty, while far from being a push-cart peddler, was certainly at home on their stamping ground, and his smug, round face was something that could not be easily forgotten.

He had used a very professional blackjack on the detective.

CHAPTER VI.

COMMENCING ON THE CLUE END.

Chickering Carter was keen on the subject of the chauffeur of the green taxicab. He felt, with Nick himself, that this was an important lead, and that something might be easily gained by investigating the record of this particular individual.

With the chief's wishes still ringing in his ears, Chick went at once to the automobile concern that had the green-colored taxicab service.

In a quiet, conservative way he approached the manager of the shop, suggesting the line of information he desired, and giving the number of the machine as well as the name of its driver, adding the time at which certain incidents had taken place. He did not mention the murder, nor did he hint at his own professional business; it was simply an inquiry and reasons for the same were systematically avoided.

"How long has this man been in your employ?" Chick asked.

The answer to the books brought out the fact that he had been working for about three months, and had come from Canada. He had always been reliable, honest, and steady. He was not a drinking man. His record, in other words, was par excellence.

"Can you trace back the call I mention?" Chick continued.

"Yes, it was exactly as you state."

"Then this was a 'call' cab?"

"Yes, and I trust that the number of the car does not disconcert you. It is thirteen hundred and thirteen, twice unlucky, if you are suspicious."

"Does the same man invariably run the same car?"

"For the most part, yes."

"You have heard of the murder?"

"I have."

"What do you make of it?"

"My man has told me everything. I believe his story. He claims that all this happened without his knowing anything about it. Two men got into the cab; they were driven to the house in question, and then there was a long period of waiting. Where are you from, headquarters?"

"No, no, not at all."

"Would you like to speak to Rollo?"

"Is that his name?"

"The boys call him that."

"Yes. Is he here now?"

"He would not budge from the shop after what had occurred. I believe that he is very much worried over the murder."

When "Rollo" was finally ushered into the private office of the concern he was even more annoyed and excited than he had been before, and he imparted news, moreover, that put a new light on the case.

"In regards to that Brevert case," the manager stated, "now, Rollo, you are playing a star part. Here is a gentleman who wants to ask you some questions."

"Let me speak first, sir," the chauffeur declared.

"What is it?" the manager inquired, somewhat surprised.

"The cab is gone."

"What!"

"Yes, sir; it is missing."

"Do you mean that your machine is missing from the shed?"

"Yes, sir."

"Can't Smith account for it?"

"No, sir."

"It has been deliberately stolen?"

"That's about the size of it, sir."

"But you drove it back to the shed?"

"I certainly did."

"And when did it disappear?"

"Smith learned of it this morning, early. It was around seven o'clock."

"Did you go over your usual slide?"

"Certainly, sir, I did."

"And you closed things up for the night?"

"I did, sir."

"When was the needful stolen?"

"No one seems to know, sir."

"Was the night watchman on?"

"He was, sir, but he didn't know when it happened. I think myself that Flaherty sleeps once in a while."

"How long have you known this?"

"About twenty minutes. I've been asleep up in the loft. When I came down, Smith told me about it. They couldn't locate thirteen hundred and thirteen anywhere."

Chick simply went over many of the questions that Nick had asked, but the same answers prevailed. The chauffeur told a good, straight story, and it had the ring of truth about it. Rollo, fat and boyish in appearance, did not look like a crook, and possessed none of the characteristics of one. Chick made up his mind that he must look elsewhere for clues. Rollo had simply performed his duty, could not recall how his passengers looked, and was as much in the dark as any one.

Baffled at this end, Chick finally decided to visit the Brevert mansion. He knew Patsy was there, and as he had telephoned to the house, hoping to talk with Nick, he had nothing left but his own personal initiative.

Things were very quiet at the banker's home downtown. Chick, however, intruded in a professional way. It was Patsy who answered the door, strange to say. Patsy was all smiles; he had obviously been decently fed and well treated.

They stood in the vestibule during their conversation.

"What's the ticket?" Patsy inquired.

"That chauffeur is straight," Chick replied.

"Oh, you've been up to his joint?"

"Yes, and he doesn't know anything."

"This is a hot business, I'm telling you."

"Is Brevert still here?"

"Yes; he's conducting his business by telephone. Sends everything down by district messenger boys. I think he's pretty well frightened. I've learned something new, however, Chick."

"What's that?"

"We have guests."

"You mean Mr. Brevert has?"

"Yes. I'll put it that way to satisfy you."

"Who are they?"

"One of the prettiest girls I ever saw. At eight this morning, the old man had two visitors arrive. I was in the lower part of the house, but I heard all that was going on. One was a Miss Agatha Merrill, the other was her aunt, an old lady past sixty, but mighty nice, and the third a sort of caller. They called him 'Mr. Braxton.' Brevert had known that they would arrive from Boston, but not expected about it in such excitement. He has a big joint, as you can see; three stories, with plenty of rooms, and it's easy for him to accommodate. They are related to him in some way, and he invited them to New York to stay with him for a month or so. The girl is a peach, and, as an added beat, she's an heiress. She's coming into control of a good lot of money the day she's twenty-one, and that's only a few months off. Brevert is going to attend to the business end and learn the ropes. Braxton just came with them, bringing a couple of dress-suit cases, and paying especial attention to the girl."

"Are they here now?"

"Sure they are."

"What has this got to do with affairs, anyhow, Patsy?"

"I'm not on the stand; I'm simply trying to tell you what has happened. Braxton doesn't look on the square to me. I may be wrong, but he looks like a crook from the word go."

"What do you base that statement on?"

Patsy hesitated for at least one long minute before responding.

"It may be intuition, Chick," he finally remarked; "it may be foolish suspicion; but as a final word I might say this: Braxton, about one hour ago, said good-by to the folks, came down the stairs, and walked out. I was watching him from the front parlor window. He stopped, after he had reached the sidewalk, looked to see that no one was watching him, and shook his fist at the front door, doubling it up and snarling to himself. That's Braxton, Chick; that's Braxton."

* * * * * * *

The blow that Shifty Mike had delivered had not been without its results. Nick Carter, only a moment before in full possession of his senses, found the whole wide world drifting away from him and the mists settling upon his head. The blackjack was a factor not to be despised. He recalled trying to recover from the blow, trying to fight back the dazzling stars and the sudden dizziness, but it was of no avail. He became unconscious.

When he recovered from that cowardly blow his environments had changed.

The alley and the masonry had disappeared; the shadowy vision of the court, its fire escapes, its lines filled with clothes, and its cobbled pave were all of the past. He was indoors now and in grave peril.

The light, in the first place, was exceedingly dim. From the little that he could see, he was in a very large room, a tepid, hot room, reeking with disagreeable odors. It was evidently below ground, for there was earth underfoot and the ceiling was low. The pungent odor of fruit came to his nostrils, even before he had an opportunity to observe things rationally. It was a "cooling room" for bananas; a place where the bunches of fruit were cluttered together and allowed to ripen, for he could see, now that his eyes became accustomed to the semi-gloom, the tiers and tiers of bananas, piled almost to the ceiling, ten feet beyond, some green, some yellow, some spotted black.

Shifty was not far away. A corn cob was stuck in the corner of his mouth and he was glaring at the detective. Nick, having been deprived with the ceremony upon the ground, his back against the stone masonry. From one of the rafters an oil lamp swung, but its illumination was of a doubtful character. There was no one else in sight.

"How d'ye," Squint remarked, puffing at his pipe.

He deliberately made a seat from two bunches of fruit that stood alone at the foot of a great pile.

"I thought it was about time for you to turn up," Nick Carter returned. "Shifty, I want to compliment you on one thing. You have very reliable friends. They saved you from that machine in good shape, didn't they?"

"Sure they did," Shifty returned, grinning.

"I've had a lot of trouble with you, haven't I, Shifty?" the sleuth continued.

"Looks that way, Carter, and I've got a word to add. You stop it, see. This is about the last. Can't let a fellow make a decent living, can you? Look at that club and Beula case. It really wasn't any of your business! now, honest, was it?"

"All depends upon the point of view, Shifty. My business, of course, as you know by this time, is to run down men of your class. My ideas of our social duties to our fellow men are not of the same calibre as yours. You want to get your money without working for it, and we'll get you some time or other."

"Oh, no, you won't," Shifty grinned; "not me. You've tried, haven't you? I should think you'd learn your lesson some time or other. I'd like to speak mighty plainly to you, Carter, because I don't think I've had a chance before. Ever since you ran up against me, you've been sticking it in, doing your best to give me an uppercut. Take back there at the clubhouse, after you had the cuffs on me. I had to dope oh a bad while you calmly suggested what you'd do with me. I didn't raise any fuss, did I? Just stood for it. I'm no hollering kind. Now I can dictate; now I can have my little word and let you do the squirming. Did I get out of that touring car of yours; well, did I? Ask me. I have my own friends, and I'm not advertising them, either, the way you do. You've got a little bread of kids around you, and they rustle about looking for your breast feathers. All right, that's your scheme. Now we sort of even up. What do you think we're going to do with you?"

"Then you are not alone in this?" the detective asked briskly.

"No, no. I'm not alone."

"I guess you'd like to treat me as you did Stetlow."

"Can't forget him, can you?"

"It's a wonder to me that *you* can."

"Well," and Shifty stood up, hitching his trousers, "I've got something else to do right now. See you later. Have a good sleep down here. We won't bother you for some hours. The fact that your arms are tied needn't worry you any; you won't need them."

Shifty did a thing which was typical of him. He lost his temper, and, having started for the cellar door, to his right, returned. He was a short man, but possessed of much physical strength, and beneath his squat form lurked astonishing muscular power. He worked, as a rule, under impulse, and that was what doubtless prompted his closing action. Nick Carter was bound and helpless. Shifty picked him up, as he would a child, pulled him angrily across the floor, and threw him across a pile of green bananas, almost directly under the lantern.

"I'd like to kick the hide off you, Carter," was his sudden ejaculation.

"Why not do it now, Shifty? I'm helpless; can't move a hand or foot. Men of your stripe generally say things like that when they have a man at a disadvantage."

"Cheap sarcasm," Shifty returned.

"But it's true."

"I can lick you with your ropes off."

"You've never tried it that way, Shifty."

"Plenty of time, Carter, plenty."

Ten minutes later the door had closed behind the man. Nick was not so sure that he had been wise in drawing out and tantalizing his enemy. He had been thrown across the bunches of bananas in a position that did not admit of comfort. His back ached and his neck was strained beyond the point of endurance.

That there was light he felt thankful for.

Rats of remarkable size soon began to maraud around on the cellar floor, and their company was not exactly agreeable.

All efforts, by old-time methods, to free himself of those ropes proved unavailing. Shifty knew how to tie a knot.

"The tables are indeed turned," was his comment.

With nothing save the sputtering lantern directly overhead, the prospect was not as hopeful as it might have been. He imagined, in his thoughtful moments, that he had wandered into a bad nest. He had happened upon the right trail, but under most compromising circumstances. He was in the hands of Brevert's Italian fruit-stand plot. Right here he was apt to find the secret of the mysterious letter and the subtle threats. Shifty Mike must be mixed up in it. The honeycomb of honest might well provide a way for him to jump out and attack any intruder. At the same time, Squint's hurried visit from the Lafayette Boulevard, after his escape, to this locality was not exactly plain. How did he get in with this tribe of New York "Indians"? What was his new game, after so many more or less successful schemes? All of which remained a matter of speculation.

Nick Carter tried to adjust himself to his strange surroundings. He was in a basement where fruit was ripened for the market. This much was no puzzle whatever. He exercised every muscle and attempted to roll from the two bunches of bananas. The attempt was only partially successful.

He rolled from the fruit, yet his face lying across one bunch of green bananas. He seemed to catch fire, despite his exertions, he could not alter that position.

From the dim shadows of the piles beyond, hundreds of them, he imagined he could see a dozen things. Rats there were in plenty, but he could frighten them away.

This was not true of a certain crawling, slimy, hairy thing that had suddenly slipped from the towering bunches overhead. He saw it before it was in the lamplight, stopping, hesitating, going a few feet, then stopping again. It worked in jerks and by spasms. Its legs, fuzzy and uncanny, were brought into relief by the lantern's light in a few minutes.

Nick Carter quivered with horror.

He had heard stories of the banana market; of bunches that concealed certain tropical pests, uncanny and deadly in their attack.

Once again he attempted to move his corded body. It was useless. His head hung amid the fruit, and for all his squirming he could not budge an inch.

Alert, a foot from his face, a grotesque, disgusting object slowly, haltingly approached. Once in a carload the thing happened; packers of fruit, especially of bananas, know it only too well; a terror of the tropics, as deadly as the cobra, lingers amidst the green fruit.

Nick Carter saw certain death slowly approaching him. It was literally staring him in the face as the slender, hairy legs felt their way across the green fruit.

"A tarantula," he gasped, quivering with dread.

CHAPTER VII.

CHICK TAKES A CHANCE.

"Have you ever seen this Braxton before?" Chickering Carter inquired of Patsy. "Suppose you mistook a wave of the hand for a doubling up of the knuckles? What is Braxton's position, anyway? You haven't made that clear to me."

"I do not know who or what he is," Patsy returned.

"But you are sure he shook his fist?"

"Never more certain of anything in my life."

"What sort of looking fellow is he?"

"Tall and thin and scrawny. He looks like the devil if you leave it to me. Has Satan's features."

"Is Mr. Brevert in now?"

"Yes; upstairs."

"I think I'll wander up and talk it over with him. Is he any better?"

"Still in bed, but I guess his doctor pulled him through nicely enough. He only left a little while ago, after spending five hours with him."

"I'll go up."

"Then you'll get something, Chick."

Chickering did not relish matters when he was warned by the presence of the latter. He noted carefully that he was one of Nick Carter's assistants and that he was out for information. Brevert was bedridden in bed, with a number of papers and books in front of him on the bed.

"I came from Nick Carter," Chick declared.

"Yes, I recognize you, Mr. Chickering, and you are indeed welcome, sir. What can I do for you?"

"I understand that you have had friends arrive today?"

"Yes. I had forgotten about them, although the date was arranged two weeks ago. Mrs. Winter is an aunt of mine. Her niece is a sweet girl, and I love her dearly. She comes from upstate and has musical aspirations."

"I thought it was theatrical."

"She hopes to go on the stage."

"Attend school in New York?"

"Yes, one of the better class. I think the girl has talent."

"Who is Mr. Braxton?"

"Her friend."

"Blood relationship?"

"No, not at all."

"Would you mind telling me about him?"

"There is little to tell. So far as I know, Agatha, who has been attending a normal college in her home town, has been corresponding with Mr. Braxton. They met somewhere at a dance. This correspondence has broadened. I think they love each other; at least, this has been intimated to me. When Agatha reached town, Mr. Braxton met them at the depot. All three came up together. Some sort of play has been scheduled for this week. It would not surprise me if both the girl and Mr. Braxton engaged in it."

"Held under the auspices of the dramatic school which Miss Agatha is to attend?"

"No, I think it is Braxton's affair."

And Chick nodded, with no comment.

"Is Miss Agatha stopping with you?" Chick continued.

"Yes, they are both stopping with me, unfortunately, at this time. I shall do my best to keep the news of the tragedy and my troubles from them."

"Is the young woman wealthy?"

"Quite so; her father is dead. I think she must have been left fifty thousand."

"Have you that in trust?"

"No, no. I have nothing to do with it."

"You do not know Braxton personally?"

"I know him simply through letters and conversation."

"What is his business?"

"I could not tell you that, either."

Chick turned the tide of the interview at this juncture.

"Have you been at the office to-day?"

"I have not left this house."

"But you have used the 'phone?"

"I most assuredly have."

"What is the consensus of opinion at your bank relative to the dead cashier?"

"I wanted to speak of this."

"I should very much like to know, Mr. Brevert."

"In point of fact, although I made a general statement, no one knows that Tarrant had decided to stay in bed for a few days. In fact, at least two of my em-

ployees declare emphatically that Tomilson left when the others did, around seven."

"You have stated that he has a key?"

"Yes, he could get in whenever he wanted to. When a man wishes to work overtime to keep his little duties up to the mark, in my place, he can do it, with no obstructions thrown in the way. I work myself, every night of the week, and satisfied to do it. Tomilson was always over his ledgers. I guess he worked three or four nights out of the seven and always conscientiously."

"There was no second person at the bank with Tomilson?"

"I asked that, and received a reply in the negative."

"What of the night watchman?"

"I had him up here not long ago and questioned him very closely. I think he gave me information that may be of value to you. Heckschmidy, the night watchman, after eight, generally sits in the vestibule of the bank entrance. He has a little ordinary camp stool and he uses it, for he is crippled, and, while a fearless German, is not able to get about very much. He says that he was around the side when Tomilson arrived."

"What! Did the cashier come alone?"

"Yes, according to Heckschmidy. He walked into the bank, while the watchman was trying the side door on the side. But Heckschmidy, looking through the vestibule windows, saw a light flare up as Tomilson took off his coat and hat and began to work over the books at his high desk."

"Allow me to interrupt you a moment, sir. Has anything been found missing from the bank?"

"Strange to say, not a dollar, not a piece of paper."

"Please continue. You say that Heckschmidy saw Tomilson through the vestibule glass?"

"That is what he said."

"Did he go in and talk with Tomilson? Did he exchange words with him at all?"

"No; the watchman finished his pipe, looked around a while, and talked about fifteen or twenty minutes with the officer of that beat. He seldom ever interrupts any one at work inside."

"Did he see the second person arrive?"

"Yes, but it was in a rather unfortunate way. Heckschmidy was smoking again, using the vestibule as his snug retreat. Because of his rheumatic limbs, he is afraid of draughts or damp air, and had drawn the street doors almost together. He was sitting in the dark."

"There is no vestibule light?"

"There is one, but we seldom light it. The watchman was nodding, when the doors opened softly and a man came in, well bundled up; Heckschmidy believed, in an automobile coat, one of those thin, gossamer-like arrangements. The man had arrived on foot, and gained the room beyond the vestibule before the watchman collected himself. He started for the door, and just then Tomilson called, hearing the door open:

"It's all right, Heck," Tomilson declared; "this is a friend of mine. You needn't bother."

"The two talked for some time, possibly an hour or an hour and a half. Heckschmidy thought nothing more of the incident, for he knew that Tomilson was a man standing high in my esteem and of his fellow workers. He did recall that some one used the telephone, for he heard it jangle. His back, as he sat in the vestibule, was to the man in the office beyond. He did not look in once, he says."

"Could he describe the visitor at all?"

"No; that was where he admitted he was unfortunate. It was so dark, at all stages, in the vestibule, that when the stranger passed through, twice, he could not make out his features or tell much concerning his build."

"That telephone was for the taxicab, I suppose."

"Doubtless."

"Were the two talking when they came out together?"

"No; the watchman insists that nothing at all was said to amount to anything. Tomilson simply remarked 'Good night, Heck,' as he always did."

"Had he turned out the light at his desk?"

"Yes."

"And locked the doors?"

"Yes."

"At no period, then, did the German catch sight of Tomilson's visitor in a good, comprehensive manner, not even while he was crossing with Tomilson to enter the cab?"

"Heckschmidy declares he would not be able to know the man if he met him in broad daylight; and yet he rather hesitated, I thought, as if there might possibly have been a shadowy something, an elusive similarity to some one he had known before."

"Did you press him upon this point?"

"Yes, but it was of no avail, however."

Promising to keep Brevert in touch with every new development, Chick descended to the lower hall and had another brief chat with Patsy.

"I wouldn't let the old gentleman get away from the house, Patsy," he warned; "there is no telling what is on foot. Some development is scheduled for to-day, and I am curious to know how and when they will send a messenger. They must have common sense enough to know that it would be risky to let one of their number intrude with any Mack or Black Hand business. When this surprise does come, it is very apt to be a big one. Keep on the job every minute, and if you need help telephone over to Carter. I'll be dropping back there before long, and I guess Nick will want to hear from you. I'm going down to see what happened at the inquest. We'll have to question the members of Tomilson's family, and discover if he had any known enemies. It's about the most tantalizing mystery I've seen lately. What reason was there to kill the cashier? Not theft, for Brevert insists—and I believe him—that not one

penny was disturbed. There must be a personal grievance around this case somewhere."

Chick made inquiries concerning the inquest, and was fortunate in two distinct ways. First, and most important, he met and talked with the elder son of the murdered man. Clare Tomilson, a bright chap of sixteen, was much distraught over the sad and untimely death of his father.

He was able to state on good authority that Mr. Tomilson had no enemies. He was a quiet, unassuming man, always at home when not at his work, and had never been of a "sporting" disposition. Tobacco and liquor were two unknown factors in his life. He was mild-mannered and far from aggressive. In no possible way could the son account for the murder. He said that he had talked about it with his mother, and she was of the same mind. It was a perfect puzzle to the entire family. Clare could not even offer a suggestion as to the identity of the caller at the bank. He was certain that his mother could not. His father had very few men friends, for he loved his home and his family, and remained there when he could, steadfastly refusing to circulate around town to any extent.

As for the inquest, it was shown that Tomilson met his death at the hands of a party unknown by means of a blade that had been driven straight through his heart, causing instantaneous death. It must have been a knife with an exceedingly long blade at that, for the wound was ghastly. Nothing in the taxicab was found that would illuminate the mystery. There were no clues. Tomilson could not have suffered, for death had closed his career in a flash, once the fatal blow was delivered.

A number of old and experienced central office detectives had already been placed on the case, and believed that they could eventually catch the murderer, although they admitted its complex nature just then.

Annoyed beyond measure, Chick found, after some little work and worry, he was precious little nearer a solution of the whole affair than he had been twenty-four hours before, and it was growing worse all the while.

CHAPTER VIII.

NICK CARTER'S FIGHT FOR FREEDOM.

Nick Carter had seen more than one of those horrible, hairy-legged spiders of the tarantula species, and knew that their habit was to hide away in bunches of bananas, and that some survived the tedious trips of the coast steamers from Central American tropical ports. Their bite meant death in a form that was too terrible to contemplate. The cruel eyes fascinated the detective, for his head was pillowed upon the fruit and the creature was not far from him, now stopping, now taking a hurried step, now hiding again, but drawing nearer with each move.

Carter could all but feel the thing crawling upon his face.

He twisted and curled and managed to move himself a scant inch or so; but he finally rolled from the stack of fruit, his head falling to the floor painfully.

The effect of this upon the tarantula was astonishing.

The creature sprang directly into the air, all its legs sprawling out, with eyes snapping in sudden fright; for the fruit had shifted its position with the tumbling of Nick's body to the floor. Alighting, the tarantula ran about in a crazy circle, darting this way and that, and apparently sizing up new conditions with what appeared to be surprising intuition and intelligence.

Nick, finding that he could move his body more easily by drawing up the muscles, rolled farther and farther from the pile of fruit, fearful lest his action draw upon him the anger of that venomous insect on the green bananas.

The tarantula hopped down, reaching the damp earth, where it stopped as if calculating. As Nick moved again cautiously, he noted that something appeared to have caught the attention of his enemy; his coat had fallen aside, and a dangling fob on a watch had accomplished this unwelcome result.

The gold fob, glimmering in the lantern light, was a magnet for the tarantula.

It was heading for the pendant, running with remarkable speed along the floor.

"Ugh!" the detective grunted, in fear and disgust.

It had reached his coat sleeve, scurried up it, and was upon his chest.

Now Carter was actually afraid to move.

Peril greater than this had never befallen him. He held his breath, refusing to glance down at the hairy, wriggling legs.

The door, ten feet to his left, jarred, and footfalls crunched along the wet soil of the cellar; some one was surely entering, and a great hope came to the helpless sleuth. Man he did not fear, but this creepy, hideous thing upon his breast was at once grewsome and unnerving.

Then the door pushed wide open, and Nick cautiously turned his head.

A man entered, a big brawny Italian, with swarthy face and black beard.

The newcomer was unquestionably surprised to see the figure of a man prostrate upon the floor and under such amazing circumstances. He blinked and winked and stood stock-still in the middle of the open space as if undecided as to just what to do.

Nick Carter spoke in low tones.

"My good friend, frighten this thing away. It's a tarantula; I am bound and can't move."

Then the Italian acted.

No fear was suggested in his manner, he having seen many of the poisonous pests.

He wore a leather glove on one hand, a peculiar glove of a peculiar make, and he reached forward, dashing the deadly insect from the detective's breast. It attempted to fight back from the hail of the blow,

but the big man crushed it beneath his boots, gritting his teeth as he accomplished the task.

"Thanks!"

Carter's exclamation was freighted with genuine gratitude.

The Italian stood over him, looking down curiously. It was as if he could not quite make out what it all meant.

In that interval the sleuth had made one startling discovery; one that thrilled him and brought the perspiration to his hot brow.

The stranger wore one glove only—a big one; with this he had not been afraid to tackle the tarantula; but that glove was familiar to Nick at first glance, for the mate to it was in his possession—an automobile glove of odd color, and with a stripe of white running around the leather at the wrist band.

Nick had taken a glove just like this one from the scene of the battle of the machines on Lafayette Boulevard. It had been dropped by one of the two men in the wrecked stolen machine. And now it bobbed up serenely.

"What you doin' here?" the man asked with no suspicion of dialect.

Nick Carter thought quickly. It was evident to him that this fellow, at least, did not know of his capture and of the part Shifty Mike played in the affair.

Could he pull off a solid, cold bluff?

It was certainly worth trying.

"They played a trick on me," he commented, forcing a smile. "I'm a newspaper man. I came down to see how the fruit looked before ripening, and how the stuff was handled. A couple of the boys roped me up as a joke, and—well, I wasn't frightened until that big bug mounted my chest. I think the joke has gone far enough; let me up, will you?"

And much to the detective's joy the big Italian did exactly what was asked of him; he ripped off the ropes with a pocketknife, and Nick stood upon his feet again, heaving a great sigh of intense relief.

"Who'd you say did it?" the man inquired.

"Oh, two of the boys; they didn't mean anything."

"Where'd they go?"

"Outside there, somewhere."

The matter of making safe escape from the place now presented a problem that was not so simple as it might appear. Nick had no way of determining what his immediate environments were beyond the confines of the cellar.

From the looks of the stranger, it might be surmised that he was a well-to-do fruit merchant, doubtless a "boss" in his own right, and by no means a common push-cart peddler. The incident of the one glove, in the meantime, was a discovery not to be treated with scorn.

So hampered was Nick by the multitude of clues that he could not readily decide upon a safe course.

"I guess I don't know my way around here, sir," the supposed reporter declared frankly. "They've twisted me up some considerable. The fact of the matter is, to be honest, I'm in New York only two weeks. I came from St. Louis, and am with one of the big dailies. How do I get out of here, anyway?"

For the first time the burly Italian appeared to be suspicious. It was gradually seeping into his gray matter that the whole proceeding was entirely different from the ordinary, and that it might not be exactly on the level.

"I'll show you out," he said, however.

He was cautious enough to suggest that the detective go in front of him, as the door closed behind them and they left the stuffy little cellar with its towering clusters of fruit.

It was stone lined, this cellar walk, and most desolate, with only a caged tallow dip at one end to give any illumination whatever.

They ascended a flight of rickety steps, walked across a boarded expanse, the character of which Carter was unable to decipher because of the gloom, and then the Italian stopped.

"We'll go in and find out about them bum ones," he said.

"I wouldn't do that; they didn't mean anything by it," the detective intervened.

"Oh, yes, you bet we will."

"All right, what you say goes," and Carter reached for the man's hand. "But I want you to tell me your name. You did me a mighty good turn when you brushed off that tarantula. I don't figure that it's my time to kick the bucket just yet."

"My name?" in surprise.

"Yes."

"You might call me 'Dippy.'"

"What, Dippy?"

"Yep. I'm supposed to be about as crazy as an Indian. I don't mind the name." The man hesitated for a moment, and then resumed: "But, see here, don't you mention me in no newspaper, understand? I want you to promise that."

"Not if you don't want it."

"Well, I don't."

Just the same, the suspicious Dippy closed his big hand over the rough knob of a door and opened it, a stream of light falling into the passage.

"Go on in," he said.

And Nick Carter was compelled to do that very thing, for Dippy had given him a push from behind.

Somewhat blinded, the detective glanced about him. Almost the first person he saw was Shifty Mike. It was a large room, if poorly equipped, with two gas jets going, hissingly. Shifty was seated at a table, and, with a pile of papers around him, was writing like mad, hair tousled and fingers smudged with ink.

He was not alone in his glory.

A chattering, noisy, impatient crowd of roughly dressed Italians filled the room, seated wherever one could find a place to squat. There were men of the streets, men of every form of squalor and trade, Italians of the push-cart type beyond question. The air

was tepid with the scent of them, and smoke puffed upward from many stale pipes and cheap cigarettes. There could not have been less than twenty, and from the position that Shifty had it might be assumed that they were awaiting his orders.

Squint looked up from the table as the door was opened. He had marvelous control over himself, for he did not wince as he saw the detective.

Dippy went across to the table and Nick Carter boldly followed him. The gas jet over Shifty's head brought out every suave feature of his fat, round, greasy face.

"Say, sir, you know this reporter?" Dippy asked.

Shifty looked at Nick and smiled, half hiding it behind the palm of his hand.

"Nope," he returned.

"He says he's from one of the New York papers and that two of the men played a trick on him in the banana cellar. I thought it right to speak to you about it first."

"Good, Dip; perfectly right."

Once again Shifty turned those globular orbs upon the sleuth. Then he turned to Dippy.

"Old man," he remarked, "did you let this fellow loose?"

"Yes, sir, I did."

"Do you know who he is?"

"No, sir; no more'n he said."

"Well, our friend is a first-class liar. He is no more a reporter than you are. That is Nick Carter, the detective!"

It was Carter's cue to get busy. Free and unhampered and with the knowledge that the door stood directly behind him and that it was not locked, he whipped two revolvers from his pockets. It was accomplished before there could possibly be any interference, and he covered, not only the fat Shifty at the desk, seated, but the amazed and humiliated Italian.

Then something like a controversy began, as Nick Carter slowly, surely backed to the door, every eye turned upon him, from end to end of the room. He had awed them by the sheer nerve of his move; and yet it was the only one he could possibly have made.

His mission to the locality had been that of following a chance clue. He wanted to discover the owner of a certain pair of shoes that pinched. But a dead man doesn't amount to much in the detective business, and self-preservation was his first law.

"Gentlemen," he said softly, "I'll shoot at a motion. I'm going to get out of here. If you move, I'll take a crack at both of you, and I'm not a bad shot, I've been told."

Dippy and Squint were certainly covered, and appreciated that fact. They were looking into two dark, little, circular openings that boded no good.

Still Nick edged backward to the door.

Shifty Mike half reared from his chair, his hands trampling the papers on the table. He did not appear to know what to say, and when he did find voice it was a very uncertain, snarling, husky one.

"That game won't work," he replied.

"It will if a gun works."

"Come, come, ease up; you know you're beaten."

"I know nothing of the kind."

Just to prove it, and with the door brushing his back, Nick fired both revolvers.

He was compelled to smile, in a cynical manner, at what transpired immediately afterward. Dippy jumped forward to the table, completely overturning it. He had been shot in the arm and the pain had made a maniac of him. He went head foremost into books and papers and pads, yelling for all he was worth.

Nick Carter's second shot had been of a different character. He had intended clipping Shifty on the hip, but his hand had quivered and wavered. There was a pot of black ink on the table in front of the rascal, and the bullet landed in the very centre of that bottle. Flying glass filled the air, together with ink, which spurted up into the face of the greasy Squint, deluging him, dripping from his nose and his neck and his eyes until he might have well gone one further and made up as a minstrel man. The result was blinding, for the acid in the fluid made his eyes smart, and he dug at them with two big, fat fists, howling all the while, the papers fluttering freely on all sides.

"Now for it, or failure," Nick gasped.

At the same moment he whirled about, reaching for the knob of the door.

It was executed just one second too late.

The door pushed inward, striking the detective, and a woman entered, her unbound hair flying and her dark face fired with a combination of fright and anger. It was the woman Nick Carter had followed from the shoe store, and that she was bent on business might have been guessed by the knife she held in her upraised hand.

CHAPTER IX.

PLOT AND A PUSH-CART.

Had the woman's intrusion happened a trifle later Nick Carter felt morally certain that he might have obtained freedom, or, at least, been given a fair chance to fight for it. Now the situation was becoming desperate again.

Excited Italians were running all around the room, the majority of them flourishing weapons, and all intensely hysterical. Beyond the curls of smoke from the two shots a dismantled table could be seen, with Dippy sitting beside it, wrapping his injured wrist in a piece of cloth, and still further in the perspective Shifty Mike, a comical sight, for all the peril of the moment, wiping the streaming ink from his features.

Nick figured that the Italian woman had heard the shots, and also suspecting that an enemy was in camp, had suddenly appeared, to learn more about it and to lend any assistance that was in her power. The very character of the gathering in the room indicated that there had been some sort of a gathering of the clans.

Brevert's enemies were marshaling their desperate forces, and Shifty was a presiding genius.

After his escape from the auto, he had managed to reach this section of town, and a right shrewd move it was, for it might have been the very last place that Nick Carter would have naturally investigated, as holding this particular criminal.

His head still buzzing from the door blow, Nick grappled with the woman. She had made for him instinctively with the uplifted knife, and the picture did not present a very pleasing aspect. He caught the knife hand about the wrist and gave it a wrench. Then he pulled the door open again, hurling her from him, until she went spinning to the floor, five feet beyond.

In a blind sort of fashion, with no time to reach for his flash, and a pressing need to keep both revolvers ready for action, he ran down the long passage, glancing back at each second to discover if he was followed.

The door swung inward, and the light from the room cut a yellow path across the passage. This was the first intimation of danger. This was followed, in turn, by a perfect troop of men, surging out, cursing, yelling, and filling the air with their individual exclamations.

Nick did not know where any exit to the street might be located. This handicapped him sadly. He had been brought into the place in an unconscious condition, and it was all new ground to him. He was working doubly in the dark, but this did not dishearten him, however. He knew that the end of that passage must needs lead somewhere, and all that was left to him was to keep on.

Running as he was he brought up against a flat surface of wall. It knocked the breath from his body, for he had not been watching, his glance being directed in the opposite direction. Thus stopped, he let fire with his revolvers, pumping several quick shots down the passage, each being greeted by yells from the distance, and other shots sounding in turn as the Italians became busy with their own revolvers.

It was growing decidedly hot.

For several minutes this state of affairs existed, the passage filling with smoke that smarted the eyes and the nostrils, and yet, as if by magic, the detective had not been touched by those pattering bullets.

That he was eventually overpowered goes without saying. It was in the very nature of things. They swarmed down upon him, a dozen or more strong, growling, swearing, hissing and sputtering men, in costumes that reeked of the tenements.

For all his fighting, and for all his bravery, the detective was overpowered. It was simply the culmination of a fight that could not have well known any other ending, battled as he was by creatures that were strange to him. They dragged him back into the lighted room, with his enemy Shifty a malignant factor in the proceedings.

He was the centre of a circle of excited Italians, all bent upon knifing him, and all resolved, in any event, to find out the meaning of the incident through Squint.

But Squint was fully equal to the occasion.

He stood over the detective, grinning in that strange way of his through streaks of ink that trickled down his pudgy countenance.

"Rope him."

That was Squint's first command, and it was carried out in exceptionally quick time by three or four of the Italians.

Then the affair took a conversational form. The sleuth was placed upon the readjusted table, face up, and Shifty glowered upon him malignantly.

"Rather slick you think yourself, eh, Carter?" the man inquired.

"I am not worthy of the compliment, Squint."

"What do you think we ought to do in a case of this kind, eh?"

"Murder would seem to be the only plausible solution."

"Sarcasm still, eh?"

"Not at all; simply fact."

"That would be too good for you."

"Then it's right up to you, Squint."

"Uptown for yours."

"Oh, uptown?"

"Yes."

"Still another place?"

"That might be telling."

"I am subject to your every wish, Mr. Mike. You're the host. By the way, Shifty, I want to hand you out a compliment on that auto escape. From what I can learn, Tom Brevert was in on it. The collision was very fortunate. I might have had you in jail if it hadn't been for that collision."

"Neat, well, I guess yes. Tom was with me. I'd just as leave tell you. You'll never mention this to any one, I'm sure," and here Shifty Mike made a grimace.

"Certainly not."

"Why, you folks hadn't no sooner left the club than the deal was framed up. You didn't think for a minute that my pals would leave me in the soup, did you? Friends are friends. I've got mine and you've got yours. They butted into you and I got away. It wasn't so hard if you only know how."

"Again I wish to express my appreciation of the way it was handled."

"I'm beginning to feel at home again."

"The company you keep would intimate that, Squint."

"Oh, it would, would it? Well, these fellows work for a living. They're not as much of the undercrust in New York, unless you fight for it, you can't get a show for your own kids. You needn't start moralizing."

"I'm not trying to. I might mention, however, that when they start on a man like Brevert they're making a mistake."

"Brevert?"

"I think that was the name I mentioned."

"What have I got to do with him? You mean the old man?"

"Yes, I do."

"Then we won't discuss it. I don't know anything about that matter, and I don't want to."

"To cut a long story short, then, Squint, what is to happen now? This place has a vile odor. I'd like to get a little fresh air if such a thing is possible. You couldn't arrange it for me, could you?"

"You'll get it soon enough."

There was a deal of chattering in the native tongue, and Shifty did an equal amount, on his own score, but the most remarkable of things transpired to Nick Carter at the expiration of ten minutes. He was conveyed to the passage, from thence to an open court, opening into the main court, where fully fifty push carts of the average street type were lined up, barren of fruit.

While this was taking place, the detective had observed some very important facts.

The Italian woman had gone, after she had cooled down, to a certain little Italian, with drooping black mustache, and jabbered with him intermittently. This took place in the lighted room, where Nick Carter could observe it closely.

The man was a typical little insignificant Italian fruit peddler, poor of clothing and of countenance; but he was in red slippers, worn at the toes and heels, and he limped when he walked.

"His shoes," was Nick's silent comment.

In the shuffle that followed, he lost track of the man and woman. He had heard his name mentioned, Joanne, and then the jumble of incidents took place.

To cap the climax, Nick Carter found himself pressed, in the open court, being lifted upon one of the push carts. He was deposited upon it, bound as he was, and then a common piece of oilcloth was buttoned and tied about him, covering every section of his body.

"Take him along," Shifty's voice could be heard.

"I gotta heem," responded a heavy voice.

The big wheels rolled joltingly over cobblestones, and Nick gasped at the very audacity of the transaction. He was being calmly rolled from the den of iniquity in a push cart out, out into the busy streets of New York, yet absolutely incapable of doing anything to relieve his humiliating condition.

* * * * * * *

Chickering Carter, after his series of failures, returned to the Madison Avenue house. Joseph admitted him, and Chick went up to the detective's study, feeling rather disconsolate. Each glance at smoking jacket and slippers seemed to make him all the more disconsolate. What would Nick have accomplished under the same conditions? What would a better have discovered? He felt like a worthless, and yet he believed that he had done all that was within his power.

Danny came up, swathed in an oilskin coat.

"I'm disgusted," Chick said.

"Why is that, sir?" the ever hopeful Danny inquired.

"We're all tangled up; things have been going wrong of late."

"I don't understand you, sir."

"Then I'll make myself clear. Here is what we're up against: First Squint gets away from us, and does it in a slick way. Tom Brevert gives us the laugh. Then old Brevert is tarred and feathered and all sorts of things threatened. He comes to us. It is up to us to help him and we think we can; but right under our noses his cashier is murdered, and the deed is done in a way that leaves us no clue whatsoever. I'm not able to figure what Nick is doing, but from the little I've been around I can't see that the tribe of us have accomplished much. Everything is a blind lead."

"You can search me," Danny retorted: "but I'd like to see that fellow Tom Brevert swung so high his heels couldn't touch Mars. That's what I think of *him*."

"Let me think," Chick retorted, his chin in his fingers and his feet hoisted in an undignified way on the corner of Nick Carter's precious flat-topped desk.

Presently down flopped the feet with a bang.

"I have it, Danny," he exclaimed.

"Yes, sir."

"Is the machine in commission?"

"At the door, sir."

"Then I want you to swing me around to a certain address. I'll make up first. It's the Lohman Amateur Theatrical Association; it's somewhere up around Carnegie Hall; look it up. I want you to take me there."

"All right, Mr. Chickering."

In half an hour Chick reappeared from the double sets of mirrors in the private office, looking entirely different. He was made up as an awkward kid from Keokuk, with long sandy hair, pink cheeks, and a smirking smile. He looked the poetical youth with a dreamy eye, and a disguise of the best character was responsible for it. He sprang into the machine, and Danny turned the power on.

"Now go it."

"Yes, sir," and Danny smiled.

He knew that something interesting was apt to transpire.

Once in a certain period, Chick Carter got on his mettle. He felt now that things were slipping away from him, and that he was not looking up his own end. It made him undertake affairs that he might not otherwise have handled.

Chick had given the address of the certain Brevert's head stenographer, Miss Agatha Brevert's charming guest, and he hoped that he might learn something of interest there if he could find her attending a rehearsal.

The run was quickly made, and Chick alighted awkwardly, going at once up the impressive stairway leading into the large commercial building. It was one of the contributors' nights at Carnegie Hall. All kinds of

teachers and dramatic schools, and the entrance was rather imposing.

As Chick stood by the elevator, a man entered, dressed to the top notch. He had on a high silk hat, and was smoking a cigarette, which he flipped into a corner as the car came down.

Chick cocked his eye over in that direction with sudden interest.

"Braxton," he murmured gleefully.

CHAPTER X.

"FAUST" ON THE PROGRAMME.

With bashful deference, well becoming a country boy, eager for poetical and theatrical learning, Chick Carter stepped aside and allowed Braxton to enter the car first. Braxton, however, did not need that courtesy. He swung in, with an air of perfect self-possession and authority.

Above, when they stopped at the right floor, Chick had to work the game more carefully. It was a dramatic school, with all its fads and fancies. There was a reception room, other apartments beyond, and much of the fake atmosphere of the stage. A secretary sat at a desk, as Chick and Braxton entered, but he was busy with two young women, and did not even look up.

Dick had the nerve to shyly tap Braxton on the shoulder as that well-dressed and dignified individual was about to swing open the low gate and enter the main room.

"Beggin' yer parding, sir," Dick declared, with the vernacular of a yap, "but what's a feller got ter do ter enter this here place?"

Braxton wheeled about, a half-amused smile on his face.

"Are you an applicant?" he inquired.

"What's thet?"

"I mean, are you interested in the theatrical game?"

"I want ter be an actor, yes, sir."

"Have you written in?"

"Not yit."

"What kind of an actor do you want to be?"

Braxton was having real sport out of the incident, smirking and winking at the two girls by the desk.

"I'm a singer," Dick declared.

"Oh, a singer, eh? That sounds good. You ought to work right into one of our productions. We're giving 'Faust' to-morrow night."

"Who's he?"

"Never heard of Mr. Faust, eh?"

"No, sir. What's he, a manager?"

"Well, you couldn't call him exactly that," Braxton smiled. "Still, we need talent like you; bright young men for the chorus. Come on in."

"Wait a minute," Chick interrupted. "Maybe I couldn't get in."

"I'm sure you could," Braxton replied, with subdued humor; "I'll fix that up all right. I'm playing the lead myself. I'm the devil."

"This here New Yawk theatrical game is shore goin' hot," the supposed country boy exclaimed; "put me wise, mister; this ain't no josh, be it? I'm up from ther country, but everybody says I've got the stuff in me, an' I can recite right good. Where's this here thing goin' ter be held?"

"At a private residence on Fifth Avenue."

"Ain't no reg'lar stage?"

"No, not for the present."

"What ye want me ter do?"

"Oh, possibly just sing."

"I kin do thet all hunky."

"Don't worry; come on back with me. I'll attend to your case; in fact, glad to," and Braxton grinned from ear to ear, as if he enjoyed the thought immensely. "No need of a formal introduction and all that sort of thing, don't you know. Come on."

Chick was wise to the man's game, however. Braxton was bidding on a funny stunt. He figured that he could haul in that hayseed from the tall timber and have a lot of fun at his expense. It would give the girls a laugh. But Chick was ready for exactly this deal.

"I'm skeert I can't do it right," he complained doubtfully.

"Come on," Braxton insisted.

He pulled Chick through the second apartment, down a hall to a large room, with a miniature stage at one end. The place was crowded with young people, laughing and chatting. Braxton excused himself for a few minutes, but returned shortly. He was escorting a young woman of exceptional beauty.

Chick felt certain that it was Brevert's guest, the charming Miss Agatha. He was seeing her for the first time, and was most favorably impressed. He saw before him a young woman, bright, snappy of eye and manner, well dressed and exceptionally attractive. Her complexion was healthy and her mouth [illegible]. That she showered her favors unstintingly upon Braxton was evident.

"I want you to meet Mr., er—what was your name, anyway?" Braxton declared.

"Ephus Lowney, sir," Chick stuttered.

"This is Mr. Lowney, Miss Palmer," Braxton cleverly said. "Mr. Lowney is a stranger in a strange city. He, like you, is here to study dramatic art. He, with his voice, had an idea that New York was the place to visit, and so celebrities meet. I have asked Mr. Lowney to watch rehearsals and to join the company; what do you think of it?"

"I am sure that we shall all be pleased to know Mr. Lowney," the girl answered, a certain embarrassment in her manner, occasioned by the evident jocular frame of mind of Braxton; "but are you sure that you are doing Mr. Lowney a favor? We are only amateurs, you know."

"Oh, out his way he's a star," Braxton [illegible] with a dry smile. "This will be a dead thick [illegible]

This form of spectacular joshing could not continue forever, which Chick knew perfectly well. He was shown a corner and a chair, while more than one social dame cast amused glances in his direction, and the rehearsal began. It was a brief character bit from "Faust," in which perhaps a dozen or more persons engaged. No costumes were worn, but the "business" was rather cleverly managed, and Chick was interested.

The various characters went through with their parts in tiptop fashion. Braxton was easily the most polished and proficient of them all. As the "devil" he carried off all honors, while Miss Agatha came second, from a purely theatrical standpoint. Her *Marguerite* was above reproach, and her voice was as clear as that of any professional.

Back against the wall the "hayseed" enjoyed every second of the impromptu entertainment. It was radically different from anything that he had anticipated, although he had heard old Brevert mention the fact that young Agatha was in New York for voice culture and theatrical training.

While off the stage for a few minutes, Agatha walked around to where Chick was seated.

"You must not mind Mr. Braxton," she said.

"What's that?" Chick gurgled thickly.

"Oh, you know what I mean. He wants to make fun of everybody and everything, Mr. Lowney. We're all amateurs here, and I guess the rehearsal is very stupid. I feel ashamed concerning it. There has been a tragedy at the house where I am stopping, and I almost considered giving up the show to-morrow night."

"You're fine," was Chick's wise answer.

"How do you like Mr. Braxton in his part?"

"He's jim dandy, too."

"I want to give you a complimentary ticket for to-morrow night. You needn't say anything about it to *Mephistopheles*, however."

"I won't, honest, miss."

"Then here it is."

Agatha handed Chick a little strip of cardboard. It bore an address that Chick was only too happy to receive. He thanked her profusely, in a halting manner befitting his disguise.

She was compelled to go on again at this juncture, and Chick wandered down the hall, avoiding, as best he could, the flitting crowds, their laughter and general repartee. He knew that Braxton was still on the stage, but within calling distance, for the play was [illegible] in its every part. To the right of the stage there was a small door, leading up to the dressing rooms. It stood open, and Chick was hold enough to pause. His disguise would naturally permit him to do any foolish thing and get away with it.

He did not regret the move, however, as it transpired.

At the top of the steps he found himself in a very narrow and dark hallway. To the right there were [illegible] doors, to the left one, partially open, and through this came the hum and buzz of many voices on the stage, followed by a rather clever chorus.

But Chick was compelled to duck the next instant. Braxton came gliding from the wings, opened the door, and stepped out into the hall, just as Chick, holding his breath, flattened against the wall in the gloom, fearful of detection.

Braxton did not look in that direction at all. He wiped his perspiring brow with a handkerchief, looked anxiously down the hall to the door behind which Chick had slipped, and, as he saw a head appear above the stairs, gave a quick exclamation of pleasure.

"Good; I was beginning to be afraid you had been cornered somewhere?" Braxton commented.

A well-dressed young man, with eyeglasses and a pointed blond beard, reached Braxton's side. Despite the accessories and a really clever disguise, Chickering Carter recognized the person instantly.

Tom Brevert was operating again, and with consummate skill.

"Well, this *is* luck," Chick thought.

"Can't we go into one of the dressing rooms?" Tom suggested. "It's infernally disagreeable out here, and dark. I've got a lot to tell you. They're hot after us, my boy, the same old tribe."

"Do you mean Carter and his assistants?"

"Yes."

The two men, without noticing Chick, who had not moved a muscle from his gloomy corner, opened one of the low doors and entered. Braxton went across to a window that was dust-streaked and lifted it, to let the better air in. The door was left on a crack, and to this slight opening Chick placed his eager ear.

"How do you know, Tom?"

"I've been down to Antone's. They were holding a meeting, and, in some way, Nick Carter managed to get in. I can't figure even now how he found the place; that's a mystery to me."

"Couldn't Squint handle him?"

"Squint did; that's the finale of my story. They packed him in a push cart, so I was telephoned at the last minute, and Shifty appears to have a novel method of silencing him forever at the other place."

"I'd call that rather pleasing news?" Braxton observed.

"It is, as far as it goes," admitted Tom Brevert; "but once that fellow starts his machinery going he generally causes trouble. I know, for I've been mixed up with him before. He has a small standing army of assistants and he gets them busy; you can't move in a week without stepping on a Carter spy."

"Do you think the whole crew is out now?"

"I haven't the least doubt of it, old chap."

Braxton began to pace the floor with nervous concern.

"You want to be careful, Brevert," he finally declared.

Tom laughed.

"Don't worry about *me*," he answered, "I can get away. He isn't such a smart steel trap, after all. I

handed it out to him during that Beula case. Oh, but I bet he was mad when he received my note. I told him that I really didn't care to hang around any longer, and that if he wanted to capture me he'd have to pull up stakes and jump around on the map."

"I'm afraid he will associate you with Tomilson's death; it would be natural, and——"

"He doesn't know that I am in town at all. That's where I believe I have him. The old man has squirted his gab about the other affair, and it looks like breezy weather, but my identity is cut out of it."

"What did you want with that clumsy old taxicab?"

"I need it in my business, Braxton, and I can't afford such a luxury just now. It makes me laugh when I think of the way I handled that. I sent Antone up to the shed as soon as I could frame up the deal. He put on a cap and uniform and looked the 'chauf,' all right. Antone isn't such a bean when he's dressed properly, and he can run a machine like mad. Well, we swiped the car; Antone just walked in—it was dark—took thirteen hundred and thirteen, and ran her out. Then he hit it for the 'beanery' on Sixth Avenue. There I looked her over. Maybe I wasn't gulping down bunches of wind when I raised the fool cushion and found that signet ring of mine. Man alive, if Carter had discovered that, my goose would have been hanging high, Braxton. It's too big for me; I've had the trouble before."

"But the cab, the cab, Tom."

"Why, I just thought it over, with Antone blinking at me, and I decided to pinch that cab for our two days longer in this burg. We'd be off, anyway, before you could shake a stick, and that closed taxi would be just the thing. For instance, now see here, you're going to get the girl to-morrow night, I understand?"

"Unless something goes wrong."

"Where is the affair being held?"

"At the Van Brunts', on the avenue."

"Swell, eh?"

"You bet; they have a stage at one end of the ballroom. It will be the real thing, Tom, as far as that goes, and I'm lucky to be in; but it will be dangerous business, and you appreciate that as well as I do."

Tom nodded his head.

"But it takes me around to the very point I wanted to mention," Brevert continued; "you can't get any old cab or any old vehicle, can you? It would be a case of talk, talk, unless you bought one of those fellows body and soul. Here we have a taxi; it's about as fast as anything you ever saw and goes like a greased lightning. Now, would it be nice to find that cab standing directly in front of the house, or a bit across from it, when you bring your girl out? It can be conducted as quietly as you could wish. See the point, and I'll have it up there, with Antone on the box."

"Right; it looks good to me, Tom," Braxton agreed. He whispered a certain Fifth Avenue address, well uptown and within gunshot of the park. He also whispered an hour, and Tom wrote both items in a little red book he invariably carried. He was not the only one. Outside the door Chickering Carter did precisely the same.

"Thanks," he muttered to himself.

"Say, Tom," Braxton said suddenly, "the loss of that cab must have reached the police. They'll be looking for it. That is something to consider."

"Never a worry, Braxton, never a one; I've attended to a simple detail like that."

"How?"

"Why, man, that cab is standing outside now, with Antone up. I rolled around in it from the 'beanery.'"

"What!" the amazed Braxton exclaimed incredulously.

"Yes, I did."

"But—I—you wouldn't dare—not by daylight?"

"Oh, yes, I would. I have changed the number, old man. I switched around the numbers to read differently. You see, they're not apt to get wise for at least three days. The taxicab people have been having the deuce of a time. You must have read about it in the papers. Two companies here in town. One has red cars, the other green. They're not the best of friends, and right in the middle of it there has been a nasty strike. It's worth a chauffeur's life to go out on the streets, and they've been putting big husky detectives and plain-clothes men in many of the machines to look for trouble. One car was smashed and its occupants rather jolly well mussed by stones and sticks at the corner of Broadway and Forty-second Street last night. All of this helps us. The company has enough to worry them without fussing over a lost car. Thirteen hundred and thirteen might have been dumped into the North River for all they know."

"That sounds like good stuff, Tom; but I do admire your cheek. You were born with a massive bump of it."

"Got it from my dad," and Tom laughed uproariously.

"Say, where is that place you call the 'beanery'?" Braxton asked. "I'd better be getting things straight. This society game has kept me out of it for a week."

"Sixth Avenue. It's adjoining those Tilton stables, and the Frenchwoman keeps the café. I took you there once, don't you remember? They have a big tin rabbit over the door, painted red. The woman is known as 'Bunny' around there."

"Do you keep the machine in the stables?"

"Yes, Tilton, you know, moved out. Bunny rented the old property and is putting in a dance hall in the back. She intends to eventually tear out all that rubbish."

"I don't believe I can meet you there again. I've got to see about a bunch of things. Let's make it up at the house at nine, or possibly ten. If you could be natural, so much the better. What are you going to do with yourself? I may need help. Have you a helper?"

"I'll do it," Tom answered.

He scratched a match and lighted a cigarette.

"On the level, Jim," he continued, "how did you happen to meet that peach, anyway? I saw her as I was coming through the hall by the side entrance; she has a wonderful figure and a complexion I'd like to eat. How she could pick you as a charmer I can't see," and again Brevert resigned himself to merriment.

"She is a pretty woman," Braxton said emphatically, "but it's the dough I want. If you tried and failed on the game up around Beula, I guess I'll have a swing at it. She has enough money to make the Trinity Corporation look like the bread line. I was in Detroit about a month ago, and I had a bunch of the green stuff with me. Good clothes and all that. I worked in with the social set, and happened at a dance where Agatha appeared to be the butterfly. I worked it good and plenty, and she took to me from the start. When her fussy old aunt decided to bring the girl to New York, to polish off those dramatic aspirations, I promised I'd use my influence. Of course, just take it from me that I flattered that maiden aunt to the limit. Nothing too good for them. When they arrived in town, I met them at the train and went up to your old man's place. She was all chatter about this 'Faust' affair. Had studied the part at home and knew the people who were giving it—for charity, of course. She is scheduled to go on as *Marguerite;* has her costumes and everything. A good coach up here has been handling the company, and I think it'll be a success. Then things played better still. The chap selected for *Mephistopheles* got a heavy cold which has lasted for three days, and he has no voice. I knew the part and could sing it. Much to the satisfaction of Agatha, up I popped as a possible hero of the day. I wouldn't see the stunt postponed; ah, no. Mine for the devil's part."

"They struck you right," Tom Brevert observed.

"I've got to go back; I think I hear the next call," Braxton broke in, starting for the door.

Nick was as speedy in his next move. He slipped away from the portal, down the dark hall to the side door. Then, without stopping to look at any of the babbling crowd, he sought the stairs leading to the street, for it was up these, and not by way of the elevator, that Tom Brevert had ascended.

"There it is!" he exclaimed, upon reaching the street.

Just around the corner a green taxicab was drawn up innocently enough. A big man, with heavy dark features, plainly an Italian, in full uniform regalia, sat alert upon the front seat.

Nick gave him precious little time to understand matters, but flopped down beside the chauffeur and issued a breathless command in his ear.

"Quick, now, down the avenue!"

The Italian stared indignantly at the detective. Then he shook his head and began to pull aside the heavy robes over his lap. He was reaching for something.

Nick was prepared for that. He slipped out his revolver and allowed the Italian to catch the glint of the steel barrel.

"Go, or I'll shoot, Antone!" he whispered tensely.

The man turned, frightened now, to the wheel; there was a snort of the machinery and a wheezing grind, but they had been delayed one minute too long.

Tom Brevert was running, with wild cries, across the street, his fists clinched and his lithe figure shortening the distance between himself and the taxicab at every second.

CHAPTER XI.

THE MAN WHO WROTE THE NOTE.

Nick Carter, completely covered over by the black oilcloth, which in turn had been roped to the long flat body of the push cart, tried to figure out just what conditions faced him.

He believed that the man known as Antone, the man of the mysterious glove, had taken him in charge and was pushing the cart.

In this belief he was wrong. That had only been mentioned for the detective's private and personal benefit. This time Shifty Mike was working with more elaborate care than ever before. He simply did not intend to be faked or fooled.

Now Carter could hear the noise of the traffic-ridden streets. For hours, it seemed, on and on rumbled that jolting cart, until the sleuth's strong body ached in every muscle. To add to his troubles, it was dreadfully stuffy under the cloth.

On several occasions the cart almost careened, and the detective feared that they would be run down, what with clanging surface cars, the occasional roar of the elevated, and the whizzing buzz of big automobiles. Yet his senses were doubly alert when he heard a woman speaking in a jabber of Italian. Nick knew enough of the language to catch a phrase, indistinctly, now and then.

"It must be the wife of the fellow who had on the slippers," Nick surmised; 'she would have knifed me if she had been given an opportunity. And Antone, what has Antone to do with her? He did not come out alone."

Then, in an interval of partial quiet, Nick caught a sprinkling of conversation between man and woman.

"Are we going to the stables?" the woman asked.

"Yes," the man returned.

"Who is this person we have, anyway?"

"He is a police spy."

"I thought so. Now I remember. He was in the shoe store when I entered. I made much fuss about your shoes—he was listening to my words. Then I followed."

Antone had *not* gone out with the cart, then. Nick realized. It was man and wife who had him in charge, and a right rascally pair they made.

"He will not matter much now," the man continued.

"Will they kill him?"

"I do not know. It is not for me."

"What is it that they want of Isabella?"

"She goes to the big house."

"I am afraid for our Isabella."

"Foolish woman; nothing will happen to the child. Is she not brave, is she not little? No man will strike the baby. It was possible no other way, I tell you. She comes back to us just the same."

"She wait in front of the place, yes?"

"Until the four o'clock?"

"And then she takes the message?"

"She will do that."

"I am afraid, Murio, for our Isabel. I tell you that. Let us go by that way. I want to be somewhere near. We can stop and look not far away. Will you do this?"

There was a deal of wrangling and fussing and fuming, but at last the man agreed, and, in the meanwhile, Nick Carter had heard enough to help revive him. He was suffering, but it was worth it when rapid progress was being made in unraveling the mystery.

Isabella was the young daughter of Murio and the Italian woman. The child had been selected to carry the warning message to Brevert at his mansion. No man or grown-up would have accomplished the trick without being arrested. Isabella, as a ragamuffin of the streets, might well wander around until she found an opportunity to slip a written note under the door or throw it through a window. This note would doubtless tell the old banker where he must leave or mail the required sum of money. It was the connecting link.

The cart jumbled and clattered on, and Nick found himself compelled to believe that he had never before been in so ridiculous and humiliating a condition as the one that just at present had him in its grip.

* * * * * * *

Patsy Garvan, marooned at the Brevert house, was not as much pleased with his assignment as he had been at first. It was deadly monotonous, to say the least.

He fumed upstairs and down, and, to add to the discomfort of the situation, Brevert himself was as nervous as a cat in a strange garret. He complained and abused, he tried to work and couldn't; he had his bank on the wire fifty times, it seemed, in an hour.

At four o'clock Patsy could stand it no longer. There was a small paper shop about a block down, across the street, and Patsy concluded to telephone in and see if he could get his chief or Clark on the wire.

As he softly left the house, by the front vestibule, and gained the street, he paused and looked around.

A ragged, sooty-faced little girl, not more than the years of age, was sitting pathetically on the curb, rubbing her eyes with the hem of her soiled pink dress.

Now Patsy was soft-hearted to a degree.

He went up to the child and patted her on her snarl of jet-black hair. Then he reached for a small coin.

"What's the matter, kid?" he inquired.

Before the little one could answer, Patsy Garvan made a remarkable discovery. Although sobbing and going on at a great rate, the eyes of the girl were dry; not a single tear did she shed. It was an imitation grief, too obvious to be missed.

He took the girl to task, making her stand upright.

"That don't go, kid," Patsy declared; "that's no cry worth having. I thought you meant it. Now you'd better beat it from around this locality."

The little Italian girl made no response whatever. She wilted to the curb again, trembling and sniffling, her big gray eyes following Patsy at every move.

If, however, Patsy was intentionally abrupt, he regretted it a minute afterward.

There was a wonderful clanging of bells and the snort of many whistles up the street from the next corner. People began to run from front stoops and from small shops, and, to Patsy's horror, he saw the frightened, dazed little Italian girl start across the street. Halfway across she tripped and fell flat.

"Fire! Fire! Fire!"

A voice shouted from somewhere.

But Garvan did not need to be told. Three maddened horses, noses steaming, attached to a typical New York fire engine, came around the nearest corner, pell-mell, two wheels only touching the roadbed. Sparks and smoke shooting back from the polished brass stack.

The little, huddled figure in the road did not move.

From the distance, Patsy knew not where, a woman's scream echoed until Patsy could hear it a week later—a wild, terrible heart-cry that could only come from the mother of that inanimate, stunned morsel of humanity on the street.

Patsy did not hesitate; that much can be said for him. As he leaped into the street, he only recalled that he had spoken harshly to the mite, and that it might not have been with justification. She may have been running from him when she started across.

There was a crash back of him, of splintering wood, with men shouting, the wild flight of three horses, more screams from a woman, and Patsy Garvan proved his metal. He rolled over in a ball, possum-fashion, snatched at the skirt of the child, kept rolling, and dragged her from the path of the horses, at the very second the whole noisy outfit whirled past.

Dusty, but unhurt, Patsy regained his feet, as people ran up with profuse commendation. He held the little Italian girl in his strong young arms, hugged her in fact, for in the ecstasy of the moment he was so happy that he had been successful.

"I'll never speak sharply to a child again as long as I live," was Patsy's observation. "If she had been killed I think I would have blamed myself. I regret it."

He placed her on the pavement, in time to see a

dark-faced little woman break through the crowd and snatch the child up, kissing it passionately.

"Wait—she dropped—this," Patsy called.

He had seen a bit of paper fall from the folds of the child's dress, to flutter along the road a few feet. He ran for it, picked it up—and stopped short.

"It might be; it might," he speculated.

"Say, that was all right," a big cop remarked, not noticing the incident of the note, Patsy having thrust it into his pocket; "but the other fellow got his."

"What other fellow?"

"The dago with the push cart; didn't you see it?"

"No; where?"

The two walked back up the street. Presently Patsy stumbled amid the débris of what had once been a push cart. A wheel lay here, another one there, but the body, intact and covered with black oilcloth, had been thrown upon the side of the pavement.

"The dago was just turning into the street with his cart when the engines swung that way, too," the policeman explained. "It struck the right wheel of the little wagon, and over she went. Look at him; look at the dago."

The little, short Italian was sitting on the pavement, his back against a wall. He had been struck on the head by one of the wheels and it had temporarily stunned him.

At that moment Patsy was standing near the frame of the cart. He began to rub his eyes and to wonder if he was dreaming. The oilcloth began to wriggle, it twisted, it moved as if something was imprisoned beneath it.

Patsy leaned over and took out his knife.

"Say, officer," he exclaimed, "there's something alive under that oilcloth; I'll cut it open at this end, and—— Nick Carter! Nick! Nick!"

Off came the folds of the cloth, disclosing the smeared face and rope-twisted body of the detective.

They liberated him instantly, and he was carried into the little bookshop; not, however, until, at Carter's word, the wounded Italian was taken in custody and accompanied them. Here Nick was soon himself again, and ran over the vital facts of his weird adventure as best he could. While he had been stunned by the topsy-turvy fall, as the cart spun across the street, he had fortunately escaped any serious injury. The bottom of the cart had a thick layer of old blankets and bags, and this doubtless broke the force of the fall.

"I want you to take that little chap up to my house, if you will, officer," Carter said; "I need him. I'll follow shortly. He's bad all through. After that, I've got a landslide for you. I can put you wise to a nest of thieves and cutthroats that have been annoying the department for six months."

"I'm your man, Mr. Carter," the policeman grinned. "Suppose you use this wire and call up headquarters. Have the patrol and about twenty-five men in readiness in one hour from now. I'll join you."

"Yes, sir."

Nick had already 'phoned for his own machine, only to find that it was out, and Joseph did not know where.

"I think I have a piece of paper here, Nick, that will interest you," Patsy suddenly exclaimed; for, in the excitement, he had forgotten it himself; "it dropped from the folds of a little Italian girl's dress onto the street. Now, it looks to me like a deal. I saw the child sniffling and crying in front of the house. I didn't realize then that she might have been sent by Brevert's enemies. Read it."

"You're right, Patsy," Nick Carter declared gleefully; "we have them now."

He had glanced at the note.

"What does it say?"

"Makes a date and appointment for Brevert. Unless he turns over the coin by to-morrow night, they promise to kill his son. He is to bring it to the den I've mentioned, downtown."

"Oh, easy, easy," Patsy cried; "it's working around in good shape. We'll get 'em yet. Who is that Murio, however?"

"I need him for his testimony."

"How is that?"

"Notice that he's got on soft felt shoes, tied around with strings. You know the first note to Brevert was written on a piece of paper torn from a shoe box? That box was owned by Murio. I tracked his wife, and established that beyond a doubt. I intend to learn who wrote the letter."

"Bully!"

An ordinary cab rolled up now and the two detectives entered. Straight to Madison Avenue they hurried. Murio was there, guarded by Joseph and a strange policeman. When confronted with the facts, and put through the "third degree" by Nick and his associates, he confessed the little that he knew concerning the case. He stood out until Nick explained how Patsy had saved the life of his Isabella, and that was too much for him—he had to talk.

He said that for six months the small push-cart men of the lower West and East Side had been trying to combat the money kings of the big, established fruit "trusts." One Italian, hated by them all, had managed to get a monopoly. He made terms that were incredibly crafty and pinching. He it was they wanted to fight. By investigating, they learned that Mr. Brevert was helping to finance this Italian—had, indeed, only lately turned over to him the sum of fifty thousand dollars for plantation buying.

This greatly incensed the small fry. In their anger they visited Brevert's office and demanded a loan, knowing that he could well afford it. When he refused, they decided upon a remarkable style of revenge. They tarred and feathered the banker in his own home, for his association with the fruit king, and in their desperation blackmailed him for the sum already mentioned. Murio admitted that the strip of paper used for the warning note had been torn from a shoe box then in his possession. He had purchased

the shoes on his way to the house that night, and had the box under his arm when they all entered. With no paper in sight, the strip had been used.

As soon as this interview was ended, Nick Carter and Patsy joined the two big machines that the commissioner of police had supplied. The details of that raid need not be rehearsed here, it being sufficient to state that, in the lower rooms of that miserable house on the court, a round-up was made of the ringleaders of the Italian plot. They were all carried to the nearest station house, including Shifty Mike, whose career justified the extra care that was taken with him. For once and all, with Squint in bondage, and with the murder of old Stetlow against him, Nick could see that affair through the courts successfully.

It was night when Patsy and Nick Carter eventually reached the Madison Avenue house. They were about as weary as two people can well be, for it had been a trying and nerve-racking day, especially for the Little Giant.

"I'm beginning to be worried about Chick," the detective commented. "Joseph says that he has not called up since he left early this morning. He was out investigating the chauffeur of car Thirteen hundred and thirteen."

"He called for a spell around at the Brevert House, when I was there," Patsy explained, "and——"

Here Joseph interrupted.

"The 'phone, Mr. Carter."

"Who is it?"

"Mr. Chickering, sir."

"Well, isn't that strange?" Patsy cried, his eyes twinkling.

Nick Carter ran for the next room, too eager and expectant to give response.

CHAPTER XII.

THE FALL OF THE FINAL CURTAIN.

"Hello, is that you, Nick?"

"Yes, yes."

"I've had some bully good luck."

"So have I."

"You do—do you? Tom Brevert and Brevert by midnight to-morrow if we go about it carefully."

"Do you mean that, honestly?"

"Sure I do."

"How did it come about?"

"Most briefly never the adventures as the dramatic school.

"Then Tom literally, practically made a confession. He admitted that he was in the green taxicab with poor Tomlison?"

"That is how I take it, and I can swear to his statement, too."

"Splendid work."

"Now, it's a case of 'getting them all,' and Chick explained about the part in which the [illegible] Agatha on the night of the charity play. All of this was news to Carter. He heard every detail of the plan and expressed his immediate commendation.

"It's to come off to-morrow night?"

"Yes."

"Where are you now?"

"I've gone around to meet Danny. I had to leave him rather suddenly, and he waited just where I had left him patiently until I telephoned a cop to speak to him."

"What did you do with the fellow Antone?"

"Got him in custody."

"Splendid. Bring him right up with you."

"I intend to do that."

"Where did you leave the green taxi?"

"At Bunny's, in the stables."

"I can't see how you worked it. You say that Tom followed you from the building and chased the cab, finally catching up."

"Yes; we stopped and let him in."

"What did you tell Brevert?"

"Oh, he knew about the strikes. I told him that there was a plot on to 'do' that particular green cab, and that I wanted to steer it away around by another course. He was eager enough to avoid a gang of strike breakers when I told him my story."

"But you had pulled a gun on Antone."

"I know I had. I explained to them that I was a plain-clothes man, and that I wouldn't stand for any funny business. I was out to work for the company, not for individuals, and that they'd better do as I said."

"Which they did."

"Certainly. I had 'em on the hip. We drove around to the stables on Sixth Avenue, and I never questioned the number of the cab or anything about it. I was acting as an escort, I said, and didn't know anything about the office regulations."

"You managed to fool Tom neatly, then?"

"Yes, I confess it worked out well. But let me tell you the good luck that followed. Tom went into the café when we reached the stables and I helped Antone with the machine. We got it in the shed. It was dark in there, and I dropped one on the Italian that put him out of business; then I used the handcuffs."

"Chick, you're a wonder."

"I took him out by the regular side door, closed things up, and beat it for the nearest police station with my mate. I told him and he couldn't [illegible]. Then I asked that a man look up Danny and tell him to wait for me. I'll be up shortly."

"All right, Chick."

One [illegible] guided Nick [illegible] big machine into Madison Avenue, and Chick, accompanied by the detective [illegible] piled out.

They went at once to the detective's private study.

Antone knew that it was all up, and he dreaded the [illegible] talk that [illegible] The fellow weakened when the [illegible]

him—the one Nick Carter had found on Lafayette Boulevard after the collision. He said that he had been stopping at Beula, and knew both Shifty and Tom Brevert. Tom advised him of the capture of Squint, and they ran off with a car, planning the collision, and disguising themselves in automobile coats and goggles to conceal their identity. It had not been very difficult to rescue Shifty, and they cut through the woods by a secret path to safety. From his story it could be judged that Tom had been up to his old tricks. Completely out of money while at the club, he became desperate, and joined forces with the Italians and Shifty in the big fruit plot. He was not, however, a party to the tar-and-feather incident, although he had permitted them to suggest the death threat for a consideration.

"Antone," Nick Carter finally remarked, as the dark-faced man on the sofa glowered at him across the dim room, "I guess a neat little cell with southern exposure will be about your size. What do you think of it?"

But Antone had really nothing to say on the subject.

* * * * * * *

At seven o'clock, on the following night, things became very lively at "Camp Carter." His study was the scene of most unusual and elaborate preparations. In order to corral Tom and his villainous associate, it was decided that Braxton was to be permitted to carry out his nefarious scheme. Once surprised in the very act, they would have no opportunity to evade punishment.

Danny, being of a build somewhat approximating Antone, and with a voice that was not dissimilar, was selected to act as that worthy. He was to go to the stables on Sixth Avenue, let himself in, and wait on the cab for directions that would surely come. Chick and Nick both intended to hang around near the Fifth Avenue house, where the brilliant charity performance was to be given.

Peter, that Danny might be safeguarded, was to keep the green taxicab always in view until the night's work was over. It would be a dazzling and venturesome climax, and there should be no possibility of error.

Made up to look as near like Antone as possible, and covered with a big automobile coat, the plucky chauffeur headed at once for Sixth Avenue. He took a car and reached the vicinity in the neighborhood of half past eight. Without entering the brilliantly lighted French café, he opened the stable doors, and found the green taxicab just where Chick advised that it could be discovered.

He went about putting the cab in shape, lighted the two lamps, and was fiddling over the fenders when a side door opening from the café softly opened.

"Hey, is that you, Antone?" Tom Brevert called, and the chauffeur recognized the rather unsteady voice of the man.

"Yes," was the guttural response.

"We'll get out of here now; it's about nine."

"Yes, sir."

Much to Danny's relief, he discovered that Tom's sojourn in the café had not been without its results. Tom's tongue was thick and his legs unsteady. He had been imbibing more than was actually good for him.

Before climbing inside the cab, Brevert gave the proper address and just where to stand. "After we leave there," he added, "you are to continue on down eight blocks. Stop at sixty-three."

"Yes, sir."

"In the dark, too; understand, in the dark."

"Yes."

"Braxton lives there. He has a room on the first floor."

The machine glided out into a perfect, moonlit night. The streets were warm and sultry, but the sky as clear as a painted canvas. Tom settled far back in the shadows, his coat collar turned up. He avoided a position that would permit any one on the street seeing him.

As they turned into Fifth Avenue and approached the house of the night's frolic, Danny purposely avoided the curb lined with carriages. He had been cautioned where to stop, and that was on the side street by the runway steps leading up from a basement entrance.

There was absolutely nothing to be seen of Nick Carter or Chick, but Danny did not worry.

The wait lasted fully twenty minutes, during which period the moon became cloud-swept and the side street was in almost total darkness. Tom Brevert's glaring eyes looked above the rim of the cab window.

"They'll be here in a minute or so," he whispered.

He had scarcely finished speaking before a dark mass was silhouetted against the masonry for a scant second. It was a man, strangely attired, carrying the insensible form of a woman in his arms.

Braxton had "made good."

Tom swiftly swung the door open. Braxton entered, groaning under the weight in his arms.

"Now, fly—fly!" he muttered.

"How did you work it?" demanded Tom.

"I went to her dressing room on the side, a private room near the stairs leading to the basement. I popped a chloroformed 'kerchief over her nose and that pair was all right. I think they saw me as I was carrying her to the stairs, however. It was her cue to go on; there will be the devil to pay in a second or so."

This was true; sooner than they expected, two or three men in evening dress came running around the corner of the house. Danny was in a quandary. He wondered where his chief and Chick could be. They were not in sight, that was certain.

"Too bad," he sputtered.

"Start your machine, man," Tom Brevert gasped.

Braxton was drawing a revolver.

Danny turned on the current and the green taxicab made for the avenue, and for the number designated by Tom at an earlier hour. He fretted and worried at every crossing. Something had apparently miscarried.

Up in front of Number 63 the green taxicab swung.

"You infernal idiot, not by a street lamp," Tom cried angrily.

But Danny had done this very thing on purpose. A block away he imagined that there was something of a surprise up some one's sleeve.

Dark figures were lurking behind a tree and Danny thought he knew them.

With the chug, chug of the machine, panting, as it were, after its swift flight, something was transpiring in the cab. Tom was trying to hide beneath the lower rim of the window, as his companion took up the insensible burden.

"All right," some one whispered.

Danny opened the door from his seat in the machine and Braxton stepped out with his fair burden, only to be confronted by the detective.

Nick Carter blocked the curb, and he was looking sternly into the eyes of the startled rascal. Braxton was garbed for the rôle of *Mephistopheles*, red from head to foot, his thin, sharp face slightly reddened also with rouge.

He was a most uncanny and grewsome-looking personage with that make-up on. Agatha, insensible in his arms, head tilted back, was attired delicately as the beautiful *Marguerite*. It was a picturesque setting, certainly.

Beyond Nick Chick stood, ready to stop Tom's flight from the car if he should attempt such a thing. Patsy, Danny afterward learned, following in the other automobile, had picked up the two detectives and carried them ahead to Braxton's street number, thinking it best to carry the scene of action farther from the crowded and congested avenue.

"Braxton," Nick Carter cried, "I think you can turn your encumbrance over to me. This affair will stop right here—and now. Chick, slip the darbies on him."

Tom had heard all this from the gloom of the cab.

Chick held Agatha in his arms as Nick swung open again the cab door.

"Tom Brevert, I want you for the murder of the cashier Tomilson. We have it on you, dead to rights. Then there is that Minton murder, of the old servant. I rather think you will write no more letters."

Tom was still half stupid with drink. He snatched out a revolver and fired it. He had meant to kill the detective, but his sleeve caught, and the red gash of light in the gloom of the cab illuminated a terrible tragedy. Tom Brevert had shot himself dead.

Softly the sleuth closed the cab door.

"It is over with Tom," he remarked. "It will kill his father, too, I am afraid. Danny, drive at once to headquarters. They can attend to the body there."

In the second machine the fair Agatha, as the beautiful *Marguerite*, was taken to her home, accompanied by Chick.

Nick Carter had closed a deal. In looking back over the weeks of trial and tribulation, he smiled, perhaps a bit sadly, at every phase of it. Sometimes his profession sickened him—sometimes he longed for the links and the woodlands of another Beula, where birds sing and flowers fire the woods. Tom had brought about his own punishment in the end. T' he had known Tomilson well for years and had often borrowed small sums from him was common knowledge now. Tom had gone that night, in desperate straits and partly disguised so the watchman did not recognize him, to the bank. He had found the cashier working and had tried to force the man into giving him a large sum of money. Tomilson was indignant at the thought. They went in a cab, primarily to visit old Brevert, but Tom weakened at the thought, and with his fear of having his story told stabbed Tomilson on the spur of the moment, in the heat of passion.

His spiteful, daredevil character was expressed in the final move, when he ordered the cab driven to Nick Carter's Madison Avenue home, left it there and escaped easily enough in the darkness.

Antone, Braxton, and Murio were convicted, one after the other, in quick succession, for the preponderance of proof against them was crushing.

After the trial Nick had a long talk with Chick one morning in the study of his home.

"Three times, Chick," the great detective concluded. "I have started off on a vacation trip. I'm just game enough to try it again. We have closed this deal for good. If you pass Danny on the way downstairs, tell him that I want him to lay in a good-sized hamper of edibles. I'm off for Ardsley in the morning; come on with me, will you?"

THE END.

The next number (934) will contain "The Mystery of a Hotel Room; or, Nick Carter's Best Work."

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DOG STEALERS' CLEVER DEVICES.

Modern dog stealing is a fine art, and in London and the provinces there are homes where stolen canines can be left until an opportunity occurs for getting rid of them, said a detective to a London newspaper man the other day. Until quite recently a little kitchen in a crime-stricken slum of Whitechapel was given over entirely to the purposes of dog storing. When a thief brought in his prey the master of the "home" allotted a large soap box to the animal. Each dog in this kitchen was supplied with a kennel in the shape of a wooden box, inside of which was a bowl of water, with a tray for food. I believe the keeper of the "home" charged two shillings a week for each dog lodged and boarded there.

A large number of stolen dogs are shipped to the Continent. Belgium is the best market, for dog sales are held in several of the principal towns every week end. Fancy dogs fetch very good prices in Holland. Dogs which will not fetch more than five pounds in this country will sell for as much as thirty pounds in the land of the windmill.

Up till a short time ago there used to be a great market for English dogs in Paris, every English dog being looked upon in the French capital as a "thoroughbred." Whether a dog had a pedigree or not, if it was English bred it must be a "thoroughbred," and, accordingly, would command a fabulous price. There is scarcely any market now in Paris, however, the people there having discovered that half of the dogs sent over from London and sold as "thoroughbreds" were next door to mongrels.

Dog thieves work in various ways, and they have to be exceedingly careful when on business bent, for it is not very canine that will allow a stranger to approach it. Many a good dog will take a piece out of any man's leg if he attempts to whistle it off, and so it is desirable and necessary to make friends, as it were.

There are many ways of doing this. A dog thief seeing a dog in a park, for instance, which he thinks will fetch a good price, will, if the animal is being led on leash, follow it and its master or mistress home. Later on the stealer loafs round the house, and finds out where the dog's kennel is and also its name. One dark night he pays a visit to the dog, whispers its name in a sweet tone, and throws the animal a piece of juicy meat. After the dog has had two or three such pieces of meat, it may allow the stealer to untie its chain from its kennel. Then the dog follows the man. Why? Because the stealer has about him a peculiar scent which will induce a dog to follow him for miles.

A year or two ago a dog thief managed to secure a position at a West End dairy. His business was to deliver milk at the best houses in the early morning, and he used to carry an empty can of a good size on his rounds. If a small dog came to the door it was snatched up and put in the can. A bit of prepared liver on the bottom of the can kept the animal quiet till the milkman-thief was in the next street, where a confederate was awaiting him in a trap with a cage to hold dogs ingeniously hidden under the seat. I think this rogue secured no fewer than forty dogs—some valuable, some not—by means of the can trick before he was captured and sentenced to a well-merited term of imprisonment.

A dog stealer will not risk selling the animals he thieves as they are. He carefully alters their appearance. Here is an example of dog faking. A fine bull terrier was stolen from a West End square, and when the thief had got it in the privacy of his own home he set to work to disguise it. Upon its back he produced big patches of liver color by burning its back with caustic. A mark or two on its ears and a few on its paws completed the disguise.

If a stolen pug dog lacks the line down the back that would make it valuable, the dog faker places the animal in a wooden cage having a piece of wood at the top with a slit of the same dimensions as the line that is wanted on the dog's back. Through this slit a very powerful dye is introduced, and made fast with nitric acid. The application of the acid causes the dog agonies, but the faker does not stop to consider that when £ s. d. is his object.

HALF AN HOUR WITH AN "ELEPHANT'S DRESSMAKER."

"Few people who visit the circus realize the amount of money that is spent upon an elephant's wardrobe," said a London showman recently. "In the course of a year we spend something like five hundred pounds to provide just plain costumes for our performing animals, to say nothing about more elaborate affairs for 'best' wear.

"To make a simple costume takes several weeks. This will be obvious when it is stated that the average-sized elephant has a delicate 'waist' of about thirteen feet in circumference, and he measures about ten feet from shoulders to hind quarters, and about the same in height. Forty-six yards of material, exclusive of trimmings, is required to complete the 'costume.'

"We can only use the finest and most costly materials, or else the elephant would be always tearing the garment to pieces. Just this plain article made of silk or satin will alone run into ten pounds, and the trimming of gold lace and other decorations will run away with another five-pound note. It will then only last the animal three weeks.

"The animal's clothes have to be cut and fitted in just the same way as a lady's would be in Bond Street, with the exception that we cannot use a paper pattern, and require a ladder to fit the elephant. We have to substitute the paper pattern for one of canvas.

"At first, however, the animals strongly object to being dressed, and much prefer to appear in the arena in Nature's garb. We have to get the animals used to it gradually. When they are in their quarters a piece of canvas is thrown carelessly over their backs. This is nearly always instantly torn off, but we repeat it time after time until the animal patiently submits.

"Should the animal still resist, however, then we resort to flattery, just as the fashionable costumer does when she makes up her mind to persuade a customer to purchase an expensive garment she doesn't want. We get one of the older animals and dress him in the most striking colors possible and lead him to a huge mirror. The new candidate is allowed to see the pretty effect the clothes have on its mate, and will afterward submit to the most troublesome dressing."

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